

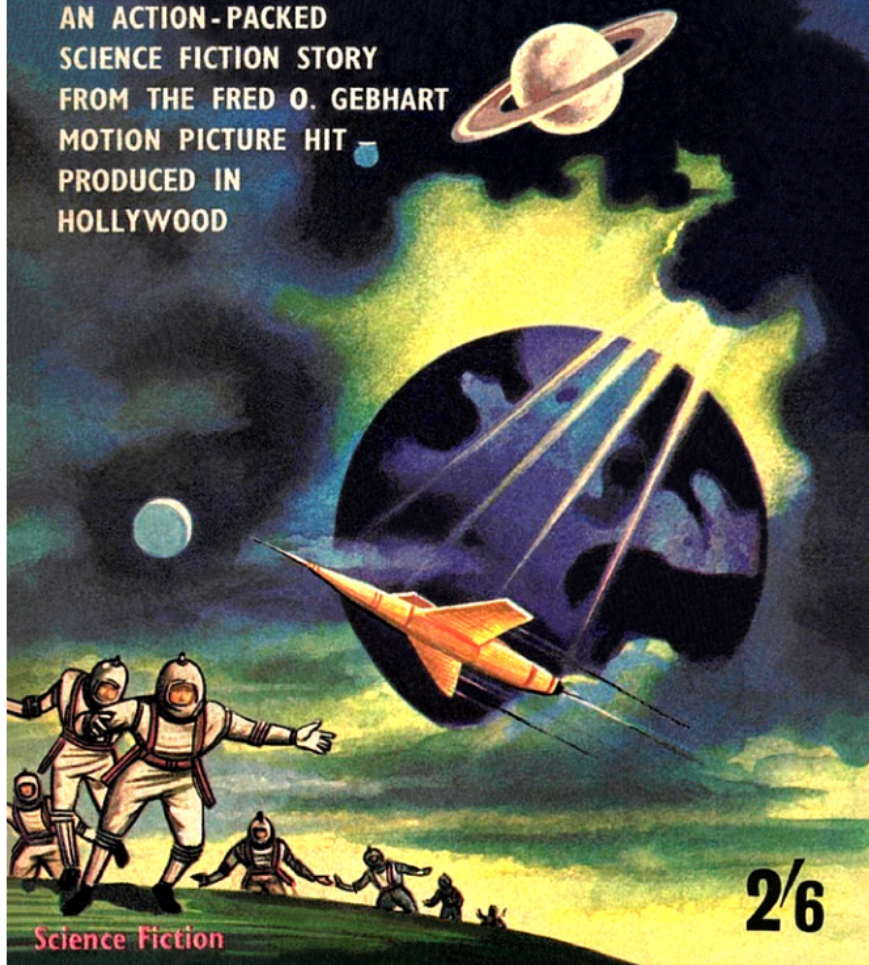


BADGER
BOOKS

Novelisation by ROBERT A. WISE

12 TO THE MOON

AN ACTION-PACKED
SCIENCE FICTION STORY
FROM THE FRED O. GEBHART
MOTION PICTURE HIT
PRODUCED IN
HOLLYWOOD



Science Fiction

2/6

12 TO THE MOON

There were twelve of them, the world's pick of men and women. True, they had the herculean task before them of travelling to the moon and back, but the *Lunar Eagle* was a fine, proud ship. They expected it to be routine enough.

But it turned out to be the weirdest, most adventure-filled journey ever made into the unknown.

Come with them on the *Lunar Eagle 1* for an action-packed story of suspense and mystery. Share Asmara Makonnen's strange uneasy feeling just a few moments before Martel, the Frenchman, begins to scream. Learn what it feels like to be the first to step on the surface of the moon. Wonder, with Bill Rochester, the Englishman, why it felt like the end of everything. Be with the beautiful Swedish physician and the Turkish biologist as some force draws them into the strangely lighted cave.

12 TO THE MOON is a story that builds to an unusual climax as John Anderson and his crew find themselves stalled in outer space, with not only their rocket ship doomed, but Earth as well! Their fantastic adventures and how they solve their final dilemma makes for suspenseful, gripping reading. This is a must for science fiction fans.

12 TO THE MOON

Novelization

by

ROBERT A. WISE



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Chapter One

THE moon, so serene and peaceful over the desert below, was about to be disturbed again. First it had been the bombardment of the missiles, and then bigger and bigger rockets. Rocket ships with men in them had made exploratory travels in its direction, but now, at last, a space ship was to take twelve human beings and land them on the moon's surface. They were no ordinary twelve, this crew; they had been hand picked from eleven different countries and were the best to be had.

Although the rocket ship had been designed by the great German scientist, Erik Heinrich, construction itself had been a joint venture between nations, a blending of many talents. Directly because of it, a United Peace Congress had been formed, and there was even quite a bit of talk now of disarmament and World Peace, a sort of World Togetherness, as one wit had put it.

The subject of this world attention, the *Lunar Eagle 1*, stood against the early night sky, in the middle of a California desert, poised for take-off. Although radio "sigalerts" warned motorists to stay away from the area, all roads converging on the rocket were jammed with cars, their headlights piercing the slightly foggy night air. Crowds of people packed the area in spite of the efforts of the police, who feared for their safety if anything went wrong on take-off.

The rest of the world waited suspensefully near television sets. Big business deals, family quarrels, everything but emergencies, came to a halt as the big moment drew near.

In New York the Peace Congress was in session (and would be until long after the *Lunar Eagle 1* was plunging into stellar space) with speeches for the radio and television to be made in many tongues.

For this was the culmination of World Peace Week, a World Festival ... and a beginning of a new era. So with the climax drawing near, the Director of the United Peace Congress, seated behind his huge desk, brought his gavel down again and again, until the babble of the many voices quietened down.

It was time.

Wearing their space gear the twelve members of the rocket's crew stood waiting in the underground briefing room, adjusting helmets, checking their equipment and gear, and generally fidgeting. But now on the wall a light glowed on and they all looked up expectantly.

Captain John Anderson, the American commander of the *Lunar Eagle 1*, turned to his crew members and said quietly, "All right, crew.

This is it.”

A U.S. marine opened the door for them, saluting, and they filed out behind Anderson into a long tunnel that led to the exit, and the waiting rocket ship.

Spotlights had been turned on the *Lunar Eagle*. She was a gleaming, imposing sight, her own lights proudly blazing from the portholes. At one side of the ship stood the elevator that would take the crew up to the airlock where they would enter. Nearby, the radar scanners rotated, ever searching the misty sky.

Close to the rocket ship a battery of lights had been set up for the T.V. and newsreel cameramen. At a signal, a T.V. announcer stepped to the microphone.

“Hello, the world!” he greeted expansively. “This is the United Peace Congress and the climax to World Peace Week.

“At this moment over two billion people are watching this programme—the first world-wide telecast in the history of civilised man ... being carried by every station in this big world of ours, and in every tongue spoken on the face of the earth!”

He took a deep breath and continued: “Civilised Men at last, have put aside most differences, national prejudices and rivalries to combine their efforts in one magnificent venture, which for the first time will take their representatives off the face of their earth and into the depths of unknown space to ... the Moon!

“Their rocket ship, *Lunar Eagle Number One*, represents the culminating scientific achievement of the earth’s scientists, headed by Germany’s Dr. Erik Heinrich. The men and women who will fly her have been hand-picked from leading specialists of our Earth. Everyone is ...” He broke excitedly as the crowd began to applaud.

“Just a minute!” he shouted. “Here they come!”

From the tunnel exit emerged the first man, Dr. Erik Heinrich, the astronomer and physicist. Captain Anderson felt it only fitting that he should be first.

His head up, he was eager and proud, and walked with a stiff, military bearing. He was fifty-eight years old and the only member of the expedition over forty.

The T.V. announcer explained, “Dr. Heinrich has personally designed and constructed *Lunar Eagle*. One rocket ship; without him it is very doubtful if it would be standing here ready for take-off this evening. A German of Austrian parentage, he is probably, as you know, the greatest scientist who has ever lived. Even though he is considerably much older than the rest of the crew, it is more than fitting that he should be among them.”

Blond, curly-headed Rod Murdoch, following Dr. Heinrich, stretched his young legs to catch up with his new friend. Together they stood looking up at the towering rocket ship.

"And there with Heinrich," cried the announcer, "is Rod Murdoch from Kansas City, U.S.A. Eighteen years old, he is the youngest member of the crew. He is also the youngest possessor of the Doctor's degree in mathematics ... by his looks, an All-American boy ... an amazing young man ... a mathematical genius. Dr. Heinrich is saying something to the boy. Perhaps we can get our field microphone down there ... no, there they go towards the elevator ..."

As Heinrich and Rod moved off, Dr. Selim Hamid came out of the tunnel a little hesitantly, and paused for a moment to look up, more than a little awed, more than a little frightened. He took off his helmet, and ran stubby fingers through his wavy black hair. At the moment he wished he were back in Istanbul, or anywhere in the world but right here. Then he shook off the feeling.

The T.V. announcer glanced at Hamid, and said, "Thirty-four-year-old Dr. Hamid is a physician and biologist from Turkey, and is an expert on space medicine. He has spent most of his professional life in studying the problems that man will meet in space. He is going along to search for signs of life, bacteria and air on the moon."

As he approached the ship, Hamid tried to fight the feeling, but the ship looked foreboding to him, as if it might fall over on him. He knew it was silly, but the feeling lingered. He made a reverent sign of submission to the will of Allah and moved on to the elevator.

It took a sharp eye and a quick wit to identify the crew members in their space suits from where the announcer stood, but when the Swedish doctor walked out of the tunnel with her doe-like grace, he immediately said: "Here is Dr. Sigrid Bromark from Sweden. This beautiful blonde young lady will be working hand-in-hand with Dr. Hamid, in search of life on the moon. At twenty-six she is a physician and physicist."

Glancing at his wrist watch, he realised that he was getting pressed for time and there were eight more crew members to come. When he glanced up, Dr. Etienne Martel had emerged.

Martel had stolen a quick look at the rocket ship and for a moment anyone watching closely would have detected a look of fright in his half-closed eyes. Then he gave a cynical shrug and a little smile of resignation. He stared at the television announcer with a certain amount of antagonism.

"... from France," the world was being told. "A radar technician, and they tell me quite a mechanical genius ... responsible for many innovations in the radar system of *Lunar Eagle One* ... perhaps we can

get him to say a few words.”

Martel moved off curtly. The announcer, somewhat taken aback, shrugged good-naturedly. “Now I see Sir William Rochester, from England. Sir William is a leading geophysicist and a most proficient movie cameraman.”

Bill Rochester looked up at the rocket ship with laughter in his hazel eyes. What a bloody lark this was going to be. To the Moon! At last to the Moon! He had always dreamed of it, and now he felt he had to pinch himself. He nodded with blithe politeness to the announcer and the cameras, and moved off quickly to join Martel and the others at the rocket ship’s elevator.

Hideko Murato found herself looking up at the ship, blinking her almond eyes, shyly aware of the cameras and wishing for a moment that she were back in Tokyo. Automatically she bowed to her Shinto god.

“... She will be acting as still official photographer for the expedition. She not only is the foremost astro-photographer in the world, but is a person of many talents. She has her doctorate in medicine and is a fine linguist ...”

Hideko bowed politely to the camera, feeling slightly embarrassed, and moved on.

“And now coming from the tunnel,” continued the announcer, “from Israel, but born in Poland is Dr. David Ruskin. At twenty-six he is an outstanding atomic engineer. Some of you perhaps know him for his astroscience writings. He is well known for his humanitarian activities.”

Ruskin nodded pleasantly and hurried on.

Now Feodor Orloff made his entrance. He stood looking up at the space ship with a blustering bravado, enjoying the drama. There was no fear in the Russian; the man did not know the meaning of the word.

He heard the announcer say, “Russia is represented in this expedition by Dr. Feodor Orloff, geologist and foremost map-maker in the world. A remarkable man, with a tremendously strong personality. Awarded the Nobel prize—he refused it.”

Pleased, Orloff bowed dramatically and moved on to the elevator.

Asmara Makonnen, the Negro, and Luis Vargas, the Brazilian, came out together and stood calmly looking at the rocket ship they would navigate and pilot. This was old stuff to them. They had piloted and navigated the first exploratory ship captained by Anderson. They were pioneers in space travel and had already made headlines and history.

Makonnen, ebony-skinned and bearded, stood majestically while the

announcer said, "From Nigeria, Africa, thirty-eight year old Asmara Makonnen will be the chief navigator. He is a great astronomer.

"And Dr. Luis Vargas is from Brazil. He will be communications chief, the first pilot on *Lunar Eagle One*."

Vargas was always a little jittery just before take-off, but for the benefit of the T.V. cameras he tried to appear as if this were just an everyday occurrence. He could not help making the sign of the cross.

He looked back at Captain John Anderson, who was just coming out of the tunnel behind him, then quickened his steps to join Makonnen.

Anderson was a tall blond, and although he was born in Michigan, his Viking blood ran full. He stood gazing up at the ship he would command with a quiet, authoritative air about him.

"Here is Captain John Anderson of the U.S.A., the leader of the expedition to the Moon," said the announcer. "Commander of the *Lunar Eagle One*. Today's flight represents the culmination of many years preparation. He has made three flights into space before, but today is the big one ... to the moon ... that he has been pointing for all his life."

The first eleven members of the expedition were waiting in the elevator. Anderson took one last look at his ship then walked over and got in. The doors were closed. A band on the field struck up a military air. The elevator started to rise slowly.

Speaking with less excitement now, the television announcer said. "They they go! The *Lunar Eagle One* is a dual powered vehicle. The actual takeoff will be by the liquid fuel method. This liquid fuel rocket engine will take the space ship outside the Earth's atmosphere, where it will continue on atomic power, until the vicinity of the moon's orbit is reached. And then by retro-power, the first landing on the Moon will be attempted. If everything goes as planned, their estimated time of touch-down on the moon will be 27 hours from blast off. During the entire flight, Earth Control will try to keep in communication with the ship. The world-wide TV network will remain alerted to bring you bulletins on the flight and the news of the landing.

"God be with them."

Chapter Two

CAPTAIN ANDERSON entered D-Deck through the airlock with his crew crowding close behind him. He paused for a brief moment to glance at the space taxi and the lashed down cargo.

Etienne Martel, the Frenchman, had moved to his elbow. "What is all this?" he asked.

The two young women, Hideko and Sigrid, stopped and smiled expectantly at him. It made Anderson realise that only the three of them, Vargas and Makonnen besides himself, were experienced space travellers. The others had gone through the various tests, but few of them had set foot in an actual space ship.

"We'll need most of these things on the moon," he explained.

"If we make it," Martel added morosely.

Anderson looked at him, a little irked. "We will," he replied firmly. "Now the space taxi can be used on the moon, and also in outer space. We have here our magnet buoys, atom bomblets, magnetometers and other instruments and tools we'll need."

"Not to change the subject," said Sigrid, "but when can we get out of these space suits? They're warm and uncomfortable."

"You'll have to wear them until after take-off," said Anderson. "I'm sorry, but they offer protection during the terrific acceleration. We have quite a few g's to contend with and need all the physical support we can get. You must wear your helmets too. But it will be all over with before you know it."

He led the way up the ladder to C-Deck. Here was the kitchen, the dining room and relaxing area.

"I hope you girls know how to cook," he kidded, his hazel eyes twinkling.

"Of course," smiled Sigrid. "Do you like smorgasbord? I hope there is plenty of fish in the freezer."

"You'll love my pickled octopus," said Hideko with a winning smile. Anderson wasn't sure whether she was kidding or not, but Rod Murdoch made a face and said, "What? No chocolate covered ants?"

"It's going to have to be plain food," grinned Anderson "and you girls will have to learn to cook with electronics. We'd better get to our posts now."

"Will we have to climb up and down these ladders?" asked Hideko, pointing to the ladder-well. "No elevators inside the ship?" There was

a shy, impish smile on her doll-like face.

Anderson chuckled. "You won't see another elevator until we get back. Just ladders."

"Oh heavens," said Sigrid. "And I'm all the way up on A-Deck."

"I'll have you know," spoke up Heinrich, "that I designed this ship and there isn't a ladder in the place. Those are *stairs*."

"Well, the next rocket ship you design," laughed Sigrid, "put in escalators!"

Heinrich bowed deeply.

"All right," said Anderson. "Fun's over. When this ship takes off, we're all going to be strapped in our bunks." He hustled them up to B-Deck.

Here Asmara Makonnen ruled. The big negro went directly to his navigator's post for an efficient last minute instrument check out.

"Half of you will bunk here on B-Deck," said Anderson. "The rest up on A-Deck. Now a word of warning. The bunks are carefully designed to absorb shock and to cushion your body. Without them you could be seriously injured during take-off."

Makonnen looked back at Anderson from his instruments. "Everything checks out fine, John. I'm strapping in."

"Check, Asmara." Anderson had delayed deliberately, watching his crew for any signs of undue nervousness or panic.

They were a pretty well trained crew at that, he thought. Already delicate little Hideko Murato was in her bunk, as was Feodor Orloff, the Russian.

Etienne Martel was grumbling as he fumbled with his safety harness, but Anderson thought that he was a good man to have aboard. He pegged him as a lonely, unfriendly, Balzacian self-centred person, but he was a top technician and would certainly come in handy before the trip was over.

Rod Murdoch broke up his thoughts by heading for the ladder-well to A-Deck. Anderson put out a big hand to stop him. "You belong to B-Deck, Rod. Right over there is your bunk." He pointed next to Makonnen.

"But I wanted to see the cats," Rod protested. "They're on A-Deck." Anderson hesitated.

"We've got time," Rod said. "Plenty of time."

"All right, but don't be long," Anderson warned. "The take-off is automatic—whether you're ready for it or not."

Most of the A-Deck personnel had already climbed the ladder. He turned to follow Rod, then happened to notice Hideko. She bit her lip

nervously and was on the verge of tears.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” he told her. “The ship has had a secret shake-down cruise, and checked out perfectly.”

Martel said, “that’s right. If it explodes it will be all over before you know what has happened.”

Anderson glared fiercely at him before climbing to A-Deck.

Erik Heinrich was the last one up. He was puffing badly from the exertion and trying not to show it. Finding his bunk, he fell into it.

Rod had been watching him with more than a little concern and now made his way over to his bunk. “Are you okay?” he asked anxiously.

Heinrich gave Rod a disgusted look and when he spoke his voice had an edge to it. “Of course! I’m perfectly all right. A man fifty-eight years old has a right to wheeze a bit after three flights of ladders. But Hideko is right,” he added whimsically. “The next space ship I design will have elevators in it.”

Rod nodded good-naturedly and helped to buckle him in.

The clock on the control board was ticking away the seconds to blast off time. Heinrich pointed to it, scowling, “Less than five minutes, boy. You’d better get downstairs.”

“Okay,” Rod agreed.

But he had spotted the cats in their transparent plastic boxes on a perch across the way, and he moved over to them.

Mimi was a short-haired, snow-white female in a black-trimmed box. She looked questioningly at Murdoch and gave a frightened little miaow. Rod had no trouble making friends with her.

But Rodolpho, the male, was another matter. He occupied the white plastic box and was as black as Mimi was white. He stared ruefully at Rod and would have none of him.

The warning whistle shrieked twice.

Anderson said, “Rod Murdoch, get below.” He had said it quietly, but with a bite of authority. He grinned as Rod scampered for the ladder.

From his contour bunk by the master control board, Anderson was aware now of the hum within the sphere’s confines, as all the myriad equipment on the board signalled in preparedness for automatic control.

There were the computers, recorders, scintillation counters, transmitters and receivers, the circuits, sequences, environmental controls and oxygen regeneration and many more.

It was nothing new to Anderson, but he knew he could never go

through this stage just before take-off without his heartbeat accelerating. In his mind's eye he could see the workers beginning to hurry off the field to their places of observation, the crowd being driven back, the cameras being turned in the direction of the rocket ship. And he could picture the *Lunar Eagle 1* standing, waiting serene and majestic, bathed in the bright lights of the arc-rays.

His heart beat even harder as excitement gripped hold of him. If there was such a thing as having lived another life in the past, he was certain he had been nothing but an explorer. Leif Ericson must have had a touch of this feeling of wonder when he started his voyage to eventually find his Vinland—and Columbus and all the many others. To set foot on a new, unexplored land. But the other explorers had all been earthbound.

And after the Moon, what then? Mars? It would still only be the beginning. There were four billion suns in this galaxy alone, Anderson reflected, and millions of the suns had planetary systems. The Milky Way was only one galaxy out of billions. They would never run out of things to explore in this universe. It would be as endless as infinity.

He got a grip on his wandering fantasy of thoughts and looked up to see how the crew members were taking it.

There was eagerness in Heinrich's face, across the cabin, and the pride was there always. Anderson would have been surprised to see otherwise.

Vargas had a tense, thoughtful look on his face. He was a worrier, but he would snap out of it as soon as the ship was out of the earth's pull of gravity and he could get up off his back.

Bill Rochester was smiling to himself and if he had any fears right now, he was keeping them to himself in true English fashion.

With Sigrid, though, it was a different story. The suspense of waiting to be shot out into space was beginning to show. Anderson was sure it was just nerves and that this cool, beautiful woman had as much courage as anyone in the ship. He caught her glance and smiled at her.

Sigrid had been staring at Anderson's emotionless face just a moment before, and she wondered with frank admiration just what he was thinking, if anything. Then she had turned slightly to Selim Hamid next to her. She quickly judged that the Turkish physician might be a little nervous, but there was a kind of fatalistic courage in his handsome dark face.

When she looked back at Anderson, he had smiled at her. She smiled back and took new courage, but felt a spontaneous electric attraction to him. She lowered her eyes then, reluctant to show her feelings.

In a cement igloo near the *Lunar Eagle 1* sat a man who was the operative for Central Control. Other officials stood around his desk, watching. All the automatic control buttons were glowing on the Central Control Board. The operator's hand poised at the button marked Ignition. A clock similar to the one on Anderson's Control Board inside the ship, ticked the seconds away. Somebody snuffed out a cigarette. Conversation had been in mumbles and low whispers. Now it ceased completely. It began to get very quiet. Only the ticking of the clock was heard.

On B-Deck, Rod Murdoch fought down the growing excitement inside him and studied the faces around him. There was Asmara Makonnen, his skin as black as his was white, looking like some kind of proud king. Orloff—blustering it out, as usual, as if this meant nothing to him—a prelude necessary for the big adventure on the moon.

And Hideko, the little Japanese woman, finding courage in her prayers. Rod had just met her, but he had liked her at once.

Across the way from him was David Ruskin, the Israelite. Obviously tense, excited, and perhaps he, too, felt this dry taste of cotton in his mouth, but if real fear was there, it didn't show.

It didn't take much to see the fear in Etienne Martel's eyes, though. A Parisian, thought Rod. A real man of the world. Yet he is afraid.

Martel noticed Rod watching him and it made him angry. The child, he thought. He hasn't the common sense to be afraid. When they are that age they think it could not possibly happen to them, only to the other fellow. He has never come face to face with naked danger and been afraid for his very life.

So many things could go wrong, thought Martel. It is better to think about them, to be prepared for the worst, always. There was the dangerous take-off. The ship could explode, or equipment could fail, or the acceleration prove too great for them to stand. And they had a quarter of a million miles through unknown space to the moon. The landing there. So many things to go wrong.

Martel thought with a twinge that he had never let himself enjoy the little pleasures of just being alive and a little carefree. He'd like to be in Paris again. Just have a sunny afternoon free to do what he pleased. What silly thoughts a man thinks while strapped in a contour bunk ready to be flung out into space.

Speakers hummed inside the ship and out on the field. The Project Director's voice was heard. "Stand by. We are about to start the count down."

Captain Anderson leaned over slightly and poised his gloved hand over a button and dial marked, AUTOIGNITION. The dial was a simple

enough instrument. It was a ten-second clock, with the hand set at ten.

The Project Director monotoned, "... Twelve ... eleven ... ten ..."

Anderson's thumb pressed the button firmly and the hand on the clock began to tick off the seconds in unison with the voice.

"... nine ... eight ... seven ... six ... five ... four ... three ... two ... one ... fire!"

Anderson's hand moved a few inches to hover over another button marked, EMERGENCY EJECTION. His heart was pounding. His mouth was dry.

The ignition flared at the base of the rocket, there was a momentary pause, and then with a deafening roar the *Lunar Eagle 1* began to rise in the air, slowly at first, but gaining momentum rapidly. It flashed upwards into the black night—faster and faster—until finally all that could be seen was the glow of its flare, getting smaller and smaller.

Chapter Three

INSIDE the *Lunar Eagle 1* it had become so quiet after the word, “fire!” that the hum of the electric motors could be heard. Then the lights dimmed, there was a tremendous roaring and its occupants began holding on for dear life.

The gravitational force began to press down on them. Anderson knew it would go to 8g’s. It was getting difficult to breathe. The pressure crushed at him. He tried to keep his mind clear, but it was becoming torture. He tried to rise up to read the accelerometer but the force was too much. He moved his arm sluggishly. He could feel the flesh of his face being pulled, pressed back. His thoughts became dull.

The ship began to shake. The lights flickered off and on as the generator took a beating. Dully, Anderson realised that the first-stage rocket had been jettisoned from the *Lunar Eagle*.

Then it was smooth again, with the lights bright and steady, but the heavy weight pull was still there as the ship continued to accelerate.

Anderson felt dizzy now. He hung on. The strain on muscles and skin was getting to be almost too much to bear.

But the earth’s gravitational pull became less and less as the rocket ship gained speed. Anderson knew this stage, and the feeling of depression that hit a person in spite of any mental preparation for it, and he knew that soon after there would be a feeling of lightness and exhilaration.

He could raise himself up now and read the accelerometer. It was less than 6g’s.

And suddenly there was calm. The strain lifted from the contour bunk. Anderson could feel his body float slightly against the straps. The ship was now riding with ease on atomic power.

Down on B-Deck, Rod Murdoch in his youthful eagerness to be the first one to get up from his bunk, clawed at his safety harness. He swung his legs over and started to leap from the bunk. He felt completely, drunkenly exhilarated. He hadn’t felt so joyful since he was a little kid.

Makonnen turned his head and saw him. He had the same light-hearted feeling, but he realised the danger Rod was in.

“Look out, Rod,” he yelled. “Hang on to your bunk! We’re still weightless!”

But the warning came too late. Rod found himself floating, tumbling pin wheel style, and his leap had made him start to rise. He yelped in

surprise, then let out an exuberant shout. Floating slowly, he struck a pose, one foot behind and an arm outstretched, and rose slowly to the ceiling.

In his exhilarated state Makonnen could not help laughing.

“You crazy fool kid,” shouted Martel. “When gravity kicks in you are going to unhook from that ceiling like a dead fly. You’ll fall like a stone!”

“Please come down, Roddy,” pleaded Hideko.

“Look at me,” said Rod, gazing down at them. He pretended to rest his chin on his hand. “I’m an angel!”

“You’ll be a dead one,” warned Ruskin.

Hideko had to giggle in spite of her concern for Rod. She felt strangely happy. Danger seemed a very remote thing.

“Let him alone,” said Orloff. “He’s having fun. A short but merry life.”

Rod pushed away from the ceiling and made frantic clowning swimming motions. He drifted towards the ladder and reached for the grab rail. With a mighty shove he propelled himself up towards A-Deck.

Even as Rod came floating through the ladder-well to A-Deck, the gyro gravity control was at work overcoming the lack of gravity. Anderson was just getting carefully out of his bunk to go to his captain’s chair.

He gave a startled double take as Rod floated past and landed on his feet near Heinrich, who was still struggling to get free.

“*Gott sei dank!*” whispered Heinrich as Rod helped him to his feet.

Bill Rochester, who was just moving into a sitting position, looked at Heinrich with a broad smile and said, “Don’t be afraid to say it.”

The Englishman got to his feet, tested the feel of gravity, then grabbed his small portable tape camera.

“This is where I go to work, chaps.” He hurried to a porthole, gave a little low whistle and began eagerly to shoot some film.

Anderson spoke tersely into the intercom mike. “Crew check. Everybody okay?”

Dr. Selim Hamid suddenly realised that the beautiful Sigrid was the only who who had not answered Captain Anderson. She lay in her bunk with her eyes closed. How lovely she looked, Selim, thought, her skin so pale, her hair so blonde and soft against her cheek. He went over and gently touched her. She opened her eyes, glanced at Selim, and then around.

“Are you all right?” he asked with some concern.

“Yes ... I’m all right,” she finally answered.

He helped her to unbuckle her harness. She sat up but made no effort to rise to her feet.

“My,” she said. “Oh my.”

Anderson had been looking around at her, his face screwed into a frown of anxiety. When she flashed him a reassuring smile he nodded and his face brightened up. He turned back to the intercom.

“B-Deck. Everybody check out okay down there, Stargazer?”

Makonnen, at his post, chuckled. “All okay here,” he said into the intercom. “But we lost one of our crew. Did Buck Rogers make it up to A-Deck in one piece?”

“The luck of the young and innocent,” said Anderson. “How far up have we come, Stargazer?”

Checking his altimeter, Makonnen said, “Fifteen hundred miles above Earth.” He studied his instrument panel a few moments and announced into the intercom. “Speed sixteen thousand miles per hour. Atmosphere thinness, point zero—zero—zero—four.” He checked the chronometer. “Three minutes from launch.”

Anderson said, “Booster power is off. Transfer to atomic power accomplished.”

He adjusted his gyro-control settings. “On profile-gyro, settings equal.”

He sat checking instruments and dials for a moment, then picked up the intercom mike again. “To all personnel ... you may now remove your full-pressure suits.” Anderson looked back and saw Selim had helped Sigrid to her feet.

“Doctors Bromark and Hamid,” he called. “Proceed with medical check-up.”

Selim looked pleased and picked up his medical instrument kit from the floor near his bunk. He spotted Rochester at the porthole and picked him for his first patient.

Sigrid got her kit and made her way over to Anderson. She gave him a cool little smile and a knowing nod to roll up his sleeve. Anderson was preoccupied with instruments. He gave a flex of his arm and grinned at her.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said. “I’m all right.” He motioned towards Heinrich.

“Very well, Captain,” said Sigrid, “But you don’t get out of it. I’ll come back to you later.”

Anderson grinned to himself as he worked. She was a physician, but all woman nonetheless, and very distracting to him. He forced himself to concentrate on his instruments, dials and controls.

Heinrich gave a resigned look when he saw Sigrid coming his way, and started rolling up his sleeve. Sigrid wrapped the pressure hose around his arm.

Dr. Hamid was having a little more difficulty with Rochester who was looking out through an electronic telescope at the receding earth.

“Bit of a rainstorm back on earth,” explained Rochester, “and I don’t want to miss it. This is the first time I’ve seen a storm from the other end.”

Hamid crowded close, pushing at his elbow. “Really? How about a look?”

Reluctantly, Rochester gave up his telescope and Hamid squinted into it.

The curvature of the earth was plainly visible and below them were the grey rain clouds, tinged a little pink on top from the rays of the sun.

“Look at those masses of clouds,” gasped Hamid in awe. “And so far away they hardly look real. No wonder you’re glued to the telescope.”

He relinquished the telescope and as Rochester went back to it Dr. Hamid began working at his sleeve to roll it up.

“Well, they may be getting soaked with rain down there,” he said, “but at least they’re safe. We’re quite dry, but going far into the unknown—from which we may never return.”

Across the way Sigrid smiled at Heinrich and asked, “How is the great father of this ship?”

“I hope the ship is as good as *I* feel now,” replied Heinrich.

Rochester turned from his telescope with a worried look on his face. “Do you have any doubt that we’ll return?” he asked Heinrich.

Dr. Hamid wrapped the pressure hose around Rochester’s arm. “Do *you*?” he asked.

“Of course not,” said Rochester. “Never doubted it. You have to develop a bit of fatalism about all this, you know.”

“*I* never doubted that for a moment that I’d make this in fine shape,” said Heinrich.

Sigrid took a second look at the count she was getting from Heinrich’s blood pressure and quickly looked away to hide her alarm.

She applied her stethoscope to Heinrich’s chest and listened to his heartbeat with grave concern. She must not let on; she must somehow force that worried look off her face.

Think of home, she thought, of Sweden and beautiful green forests and mountains; of Stockholm with its beautiful old buildings with orange awnings, the harbour at sunset ...

But what if something had gone wrong—really wrong. The ship was the fastest ever built. Perhaps too fast. The acceleration had been terrible. Maybe it was more than human beings could take.

They had all passed the rigorous tests, the pressurized room, the centrifuge machine which was supposed to simulate the force of g's. But this had seemed so much worse. It was almost unbearable. Perhaps it had affected everybody badly.

Don't think about it. Heinrich is bad, but he is older, much older than the rest and maybe not in the best of health. Still feeling deeply concerned for the scientist she managed to relax her expression, force a trace of a little smile.

She stole a glance in Hamid's direction. He was unwrapping the pressure hose from around Rochester's arm with an obvious look of unconcern on his face.

Then it was just Erik Heinrich. But don't let him know.

Martel came up on to A-Deck just then, looking disgusted. He said to no one in particular, "For the first time in my life I am looking at the world from a new viewpoint. I've always thought that people were silly to sit around side-walk cafés and sip wine and just watch people go by. But that is what I'd like to be doing right now." He brought his hand up to his lips as though sampling wine.

They all turned to stare at him. Rochester grinned. "Don't you think we'll make it either, Martel?"

With a show of *sang-froid*, Martel exclaimed. "But of course; it's perfectly reasonable that we should make it. Me, I'll just whistle in the dark. *C'est la vie!*"

Sigrid had finished with Heinrich and was grateful to Martel for his distraction. She made notations on the chart she carried, positive in her own mind that Heinrich had not seen the look of alarm on her face.

She dismissed him with a nod and a smile and said, "You're next, Roddy."

Rod was at the cat's cages, talking to them fondly, scratching their ears and letting them nuzzle his fingers. Rodolpho, the black male, had finally decided to tolerate him.

"Well, Mimi—Rodolpho," Rod was saying to them, "some attic you've climbed to, isn't it? But don't you worry. Your work's going to start on the moon. It'll be fun for you, because they want to see if procreation can take place up there. So, Mimi, maybe you'll have a litter of moon kittens when we come back to Old Mother Earth."

Sigrid, amused, called to him again. "Roddy, if you can possible pull yourself away ..."

He grinned and came to her at once.

Dr. Hamid had his hands full with a difficult patient. "Oh, all these unimportant details," grumbled Martel, gesturing freely. "It is not at all necessary. I am in the best of health."

"We just want to make sure," Hamid insisted. He looked at Sigrid and rolled his eyes in disgust.

Rod, whose pressure was now being taken by Sigrid, glanced off at Rochester. "Do I call you 'Sir William'," he asked, "or 'Dr. Rochester'?"

"Just call me 'Bill'," replied Rochester good naturedly.

"Okay, Bill."

Martel was annoyed by this. "What is the matter with your American youth?" he asked, waving his free arm again. "Do you not know that children should be seen and not heard?"

Rod's face flushed. "I am hardly a child, Dr. Martel. I, too, have a degree."

"I simply give up," said Martel, exasperated. "Why was this boy sent along? I ask you. It's beyond all reason."

Heinrich came over and put a kindly arm on Rod's shoulder, smiling at the boy.

"There may come a time when you'll be thankful that the boy is with us," he told Martel crisply. "He carries the entire mathematical formulae of our course right there in his bright young head."

Sigrid was annoyed. "Gentlemen, please!" She applied the stethoscope again to Rod's chest. "If you must know, this 'child' has held up much better than any of the rest of us so far."

"I can well assure you, Mademoiselle," insisted Martel, "that there is absolutely nothing the matter with me."

Hamid couldn't help smiling. "Dr. Martel, please! Your blood pressure is rising!" He and Sigrid exchanged amused looks.

Agitatedly, Martel, for his own good, forced himself to remain calm.

Sigrid, having finished with Rod, gave him a pat of commendation and a smile, "Good boy."

To Selim she said, "I'll start downstairs."

"Good," said Hamid.

He watched her walk to the ladder-well. She's the only one here who looks good in the partial-pressure suits, he thought.

At the bottom of the ladder, on B-Deck, Sigrid cornered David Ruskin.

"Dr. Ruskin, I'll take you first."

He obligingly rolled up his sleeve. "What about Dr. Heinrich?" he asked glancing apprehensively up the ladder-well. "How does he

rate?"

Sigrid gave a worried little shake of her head. "The worst, I'm afraid."

Ruskin looked troubled. "I had a feeling. But it's only natural, I suppose. He is the oldest. That acceleration is hard on your system."

"Don't say anything to anybody else," Sigrid requested. "No ill effects, really."

"Such a brilliant man!" exclaimed Ruskin. "If only some day I could be like him!"

Orloff had come into earshot and although he knew who they were talking about he said, "Brilliant, did I hear? Quite right! It is the Russians who contribute most to interplanetary travel."

"What?" said Ruskin curtly.

Orloff barked at him. "Sputnik One, Sputnik Two, and a few dogs! Sputnik Three, and ..."

Hideko, who had been standing by the porthole, gave a tinkling, shy laugh. Orloff turned stiffly and scowled at her disapprovingly.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" said Hideko. "Come, come! We have much work ahead of us."

Orloff bowed in mock graciousness. "My work will begin on the surface of the moon, not in this rocket. I am a geologist and a cartographer, and the foremost mapmaker in the world."

"Yes," agreed Ruskin. "Poland is still on your Russian map. Don't get any ideas about my State of Israel!" He glowered at Orloff.

The colour rose in Orloff's face and he took a menacing step toward the Israelite.

Sigrid looked at him in quiet reprimand. "Dr. Orloff, please roll up your sleeve."

Orloff spluttered for a few seconds, then shrugged. "*Nichevo, nichevo*," he said.

Asmara Makonnen, seated at his navigation control centre, was brought to sharp attention by the flicking of a dial. He watched the movement of the needle grow more agitated, then flipped on the intercom mike.

"Captain Anderson, check your instruments," he said sharply. "We may have generator trouble."

Anderson's terse voice came back, "Check."

Now some of Makonnen's instruments began to go crazy. He studied his control board for a moment, the rakes and mounts of instruments, the spectrograph, the radio and radar panels. They were all reacting.

Anderson's voice came back. "Have your instruments all gone

cockeyed?"

"Check," said Mackonnen. "We're in an unusual magnetic field, Captain."

"Right," agreed Anderson. "It's raising hell with the gauges, but we'll soon be through it."

Makonnen's voice was low and filled with awe. "What is it, John?" he asked. "I mean, really. It gives me the strangest feeling."

Anderson laughed. "You just named it, Stargazer. An unusual magnetic field."

"I don't understand these things, John, and I'm an educated man. As an astronomer I have looked up in the heavens with my telescope and seen nothing between the planets and stars but empty space. What is it doing way out here? How did it originate? These things scare me."

"Stargazer," said Anderson, "you've been with me before and we have always, sooner or later, run into these magnetic currents."

"Yes, that's right," said Makonnen.

"And nothing has ever happened."

"Nothing has ever happened," agreed Makonnen.

"But each time I get this strange feeling."

"You're just superstitious, Asmara. You always did say you have psychic powers."

"It isn't that," Makonnen said. "But I would know, even without the instruments, once we really got into it."

Orloff had rolled up his sleeve and Sigrid was about to apply the hose when the sharp, agonised scream came from A-Deck. It was a man's scream and it came again and again.

"Dr. Bromark! Dr. Bromark!" Rod called. "Come quickly."

Chapter Four

MARTEL was doubled over, gasping, howling, screaming, clutching at his jaw in torment, as Sigrid came rushing up.

“Mon Dieu!” he shrieked. “My teeth!” He gave a St. Vitus dance.

Sigrid looked at Hamid, her blue eyes round with puzzlement. “In the name of God, what’s the matter with him?”

Hamid only shrugged and looked bewildered.

“They’re killing me!” screamed Martel, his eyes were wild, his face contorted with pain. “Help me! somebody help me!”

Rochester stepped up to Sigrid and ventured an opinion. “The magnetic eddy currents are probably burning up his metal fillings.”

Sigrid turned to Dr. Hamid. “Is there anything we can do?”

“I wouldn’t know what,” he replied.

Martel moaned and carried on in pain. “I can’t stand this! Extract my teeth, Doctor. I don’t care—anything!” He began to shriek.

The two physicians looked at each other helplessly as Martel clawed at his face and began to scream in the agony of the damned.

After a short while Rod came hurrying back, breathing a little heavily, with an empty container shaped roughly like a square bucket.

“Put this over your head,” he said.

It was a heavy, clumsy container. Martel recoiled from it. “Are you crazy?” he yelled.

“It’s one of the insulated containers for the atomic bomblets,” explained Rod.

“I’m dying!” screamed Martel. “Get this idiot boy out of my sight!”

“But it’s lined in lead,” began Rod.

Rochester took the container out of his hands. “It may be a very good idea. Worth a bloody try, at least. Here.”

With some difficulty he got Martel to stand still, and fitted the weird-looking container over his head. Immediately Martel relaxed; his head buried in the container, but his body almost sighed with relief. He held up one hand, making a sign with his thumb and forefinger as a circle, signifying that the pain had gone.

Sigrid examined the contraption with some concern. “Can you breathe in there?” she asked.

Martel appeared not to hear.

Rod grinned, pleased. “That’s an improvement. A big

improvement.”

“Well,” said Rochester smiling, “at least that will keep him quiet for a while. If he takes a second space trip, he’d better have some lead fillings made when he returns to Paris.”

Sigrid nodded. “Well! We must make a special note of this. People who travel in space must have good teeth—or no teeth at all.”

Heinrich had been watching the whole show, highly amused. “I’ll never have to worry,” he said, giving a toothpaste ad. smile. He turned to Rod, handing him a chart. “Roddy, would you get our exact position from the First Pilot?”

Rod nodded and took the chart over to Vargas, who was leaning forward in the pilot’s chair reading instruments.

“This is from Dr. Heinrich,” said Rod.

Vargas nodded, took the chart, and began to pore over it.

Hideko Murata, had come up from B-Deck and now noticed Vargas busy with the chart. He turned it this way and that, making notes with a stub of a pencil. Laying it down, he squinted through a telescope.

Hideko felt like a cat, overcome by curiosity. This young Brazilian was so intense, she certainly had no right to intrude; but she could not resist. She found herself moving in close.

Vargas’ elbow bumped against her lip. He looked up at this oriental woman who was gazing down at him with such curiosity.

“What are you doing?” asked Hideko. Then she smiled in her shy way that seemed to apologise for her intrusion.

Vargas smiled back.

It was a nice smile, thought Hideko. Such white teeth. And he seems so very nice.

“I’m comparing the chart with our actual flight position,” he explained.

He peered back into the telescope, made an adjustment, then glanced back up at Hideko.

“Care to have a look?” he invited.

Hideko smiled gratefully and nodded with great interest. She peeked through the telescope, smiling. But what she saw was to her a dreadful, ugly thing.

The universe was spread out in awesome infinity, colourless and stark. From a black nothingness the stars gave out an untwinkling steady light like the unblinking eyes of thousand of living creatures. To Hideko they were like monsters.

She gasped.

“In just these few moments, Nature has lost its beauty,” she said to

Vargas. "The beautiful blue sky has turned into such a fearful black."

"But that's only logical, isn't it?" said Vargas. "It's the way the universe has to be. It's only Earth's atmosphere that makes the sky take on colour. If there's no atmosphere to hold dust and vapour, there is no colour."

"But if you'd been this high as many times as I, you'd find it all quite fascinating. It's more real, more clearly defined. Illusion is gone."

"Illusion," gasped Hideko.

"Yes, illusion," insisted Vargas. "Here we see the Universe as it truly is, through the naked eye of its Creator."

Hideko could only shake her head gently, and her eyes got bright and moist. Memories flooded in on her, of her childhood days and her family, and the beauty and nostalgia. Was beauty an illusion? She remembered how her mother arranged spring flowers in a vase. Her father's garden, so green and peaceful in the sunshine, with its little red bridge over a little pool that reflected blue sky and white clouds among the pink water lilies. Illusion? Perhaps. In a crowded ugly city, in a tiny rocky space, her father had laboured long hours to create an illusion of peace. Memories of it crowded in on her. Of her little brother, with his round face and saucer hair-cut playing there, and of the little humming bird that would hover so close to get his honey and water.

The memories flooded back in a rush. But they were nothing but illusions. Now all that was real was this blackness out there. She felt dizzy. She fought a kind of slow crawling panic inside her, not understanding her feelings and thoughts too well. For the first time she wished she had never come with the expedition.

She started to say something more to Vargas, to argue with him, perhaps manage to draw some comfort from him, but he had turned casually to his telescope.

But Heinrich had overheard the last part of the conversation. He placed a chart between Vargas and Hideko and turned to her.

"Don't let the sight of that out there upset you," he said kindly. "We all get a kind of space fever at one time or another. It's like homesickness only worse. We are in a place that is alien to us, and we instinctively long for the earth. We all get a touch of it first time up."

"But if colour and beauty is just an illusion, it would seem that our world ..."

Heinrich stopped with a shake of his head. "God meant us to have beauty and colour."

Vargas turned from his telescope with a sigh. "There is a tranquillity

to this out here, too. It grows on you. And I did not mean what I said in the way that you interpreted it. Just that the dust and vapour in the atmosphere create an illusion of blue sky and yellow sunlight.”

Heinrich gave her a wink. “Perhaps when he becomes my age, he will appreciate the finer points and the more beautiful things of life.”

Hideko smiled in agreement, but it was Orloff who answered him. “But at that time it might be too late.” he said with irony. He turned and made his way down the ladder to B-Deck.

Heinrich muttered something obscene in German under his breath. Then he forgot about Orloff for a moment while watching Sigrid and Selim, who were putting away instruments in their bags across the cabin. Those glances they were exchanging. Could it possibly be that romance was blossoming here?

Asmara Makonnen was at the navigator’s post, looking out through the navigator-telescope. Feodor Orloff leaped off the ladder from A-Deck and walked over to him. Makonnen glanced at him and smiled cordially. Orloff gave a pleased grunt and put a strong hand approvingly on Makonnen’s wide shoulder. “You seem to be more compatible than the others,” he said.

Makonnen cocked his head philosophically and asked, “Is our little Earth the only spot in the universe where evolution has flowered into organic life?”

“Very well put, Asmara,” said Orloff, giving him a friendly pat. “You should have become a poet instead of a scientist.”

Makonnen shrugged affably. “Want to take a look?” he asked, offering Orloff the telescope.

Orloff bent to have a look.

The earth, slightly oblate, hung in a black velvet emptiness. Part was in shadow, but the other part seemed to glow with a blue-green light as it reflected the sun’s rays. There was the polar cap, white and glistening, there were the continents. But they all seemed somehow unimportant as viewed from outer space. The earth was like some godchild’s toy ball, resting quietly in a black, still pool. Orloff had to catch his breath. It gave him a mystic, haunting feeling.

He turned away and said to Makonnen, “We understand one another, you and I.”

“Could we be the only living creatures in the Cosmos?” asked Makonnen.

Orloff shrugged. “The only way to find out is for a man to go there himself.”

Makonnen was emphatic. “But tell me, do you really think we will

find that life exists in some form on the moon, Dr. Orloff?"

"I think so," said Orloff matter-of-factly.

Out of force of habit, Makonnen looked back at his radarscope and made some minor adjustments. He appeared suddenly troubled. He stared at the radarscope intently, studying the blips that had all at once appeared there out of nowhere. They were becoming more distinct and were beginning to multiply.

He grabbed the intercom and said sharply, "Meteor clusters ahead!"

Anderson's voice, steady as always, came from the intercom speaker. "Check."

Makonnen looked back on to his radarscope. It was filled with blips.

He said into the intercom, "Looks like a collision course."

Anderson's voice came back over the intercom. "Changing over to auto-reaction pilot. Vargas, stand by to take manual control."

Vargas replied immediately, "Check, Captain."

Anderson studied the radar screen, his brows knitted together. On his control board was a special radar screen that differed from Makonnen's scope.

On his screen was a tiny rocket ship, a scale model mockup of the *Lunar Eagle 1*. A solid line behind the model indicated the course it had already followed, and a dotted line preceding it showed the course the space ship was to follow. The blips were there on the screen, and the dotted line ran right into them.

The lights began to flicker off and on, and the cats, badly frightened, drew up their backs, spitting and growling.

Little beads of perspiration had broken out on Anderson's forehead. Intently he watched the radar panel and saw the little dotted line begin to move, then veer off quickly to an angle that avoided the blips. If the auto pilot was functioning properly, it had steered the ship away from the meteors.

He switched on the intercom.

"Captain to Navigator. Auto pilot changed course eight degrees to avoid hitting meteors."

"But Captain," warned Makonnen. "They're still registering on my scope."

"Repeat," said Anderson calmly. "Auto pilot changed course eight degrees ..."

"Check," said Makonnen doubtfully.

Anderson had a mental picture of these huge meteors hurtling towards them like giant hailstones, some almost as large as the *Lunar Eagle 1*. And who was it who had said they were seldom larger than a

pea?

If the auto-pilot device was wrong—well, their troubles would be over. They probably wouldn't know what had hit them, if one of the big meteors struck the rocket ship. They would be derelicts of space, doomed to drift in pieces for all eternity. Anderson shuddered.

He remembered the time two years ago when the meteor had hit the ship that he, Vargas and Makonnen were in. They didn't have the safety devices like the auto pilot then. Makonnen had quickly plotted a course that they hoped would avoid the shower of meteors, but one had nonetheless exploded through the hull. Luckily, that had been a small one and they had patched the bullet-like hole it made before all the air escaped and suffocated them. They wore clumsy partial-pressure suits in those days, and all three of them—the entire crew—had found them uncomfortable and had taken them off. That had been close. Vargas had fainted from lack of oxygen, but Makonnen had managed to grab up a disc-shaped meteor plug and jam it in the hole.

Instinct told him the meteors would be very close to them now, but off to one side. He tensed, anxiously waiting for them to pass.

Hideko and Sigrid were just crossing the porthole, talking animatedly. In the short time they had known each other they had become good friends.

Suddenly, past the porthole window, the meteors screeched their way. The cats, in the nearby cages, hissed, terrified.

Sigrid was startled out of her wits. "*Herre Gud!* What was that?"

Rod came by and said casually, "Just some stray meteors."

He turned to the cats, helping Hideko soothe them. "Come on, Mimi, Rodolpho," he said. "You've still got eight lives left."

The last of the meteors screeched past, and having successfully sidestepped them, the ship automatically got back to its original course.

Makonnen reported happily into the intercom, "Circumnavigation one hundred per cent successful. Back on original course."

Feodor Orloff glowed with pleasure. He fairly strutted. "*Dobre!*" he beamed. "That worked perfectly!" He saw that Heinrich was within easy earshot and a roguish expression crept into his face. "After all, we invented it," he added sourly.

Heinrich studiously avoided looking at him. He said dryly, without emotion, "With *our* captured German scientists."

Orloff looked at Heinrich, shrugged his shoulders, and walked away.

And the rocket ship sped up and upward into space, the earth revolving behind it in the far away distance, a pale oblate globe in the vast loneliness of the universe.

Chapter Five

DOWN on the C-Deck Hideko took frozen food from the deep freeze. She handed some packages to Sigrid who unpacked them and put steaks on an electronic oven. She was humming a little tune and went about her business with unusual deftness and domestic assurance.

“For a physician you seem to be quite at home in a kitchen,” Hideko observed.

Sigrid got out the plates. “Isn’t it a normal function for any woman to cook for men?” she asked.

“Do you mean *‘men’*? Or any *man* in particular,” Hideko wanted to know. She looked over at Selim who had been the first to sit down at the table, then placed a steak and some vegetables on a plate and moved to take the food to Selim.

Sigrid lifted the plate gently but firmly out of her hands and silently, cat-like, insinuated it in front of the Turkish biologist. He looked up at her with polite gratitude and a friendly smile, and glanced back over his shoulder as she moved away to put more food on the electronic oven.

Rod Murdoch and Erik Heinrich came down the ladder from B-Deck, followed closely by Etienne Martel and David Ruskin.

Rod sniffed the air. “Steak,” he exclaimed. “My favourite food.”

Martel snorted. “It would be.” He turned to Sigrid. “I am not too hungry. I’ll have some Creole fritters, or perhaps some squab.”

“I am afraid,” replied Sigrid with a straight face, “that my cooking skills are not quite up to your delicate appetite.”

Hideko gave a little giggle. “Don’t look at me,” she said.

“But it is so simple,” said Martel. “Just take a squab, marinate in light cream, roll in flour, season with salt, nutmeg, clove ...”

“Ah shut up,” said Ruskin genially.

“We have steak,” said Sigrid, a tone of finality to her voice.

Martel looked disappointed. “Just what I was afraid of. No French cooking.”

They took their trays of food as Hideko brought them out.

“I want my steak well done,” said Ruskin.

“Then you’ll have to wait just about a minute longer,” Sigrid said.

Heinrich seated himself next to Rod and began to eat absent-mindedly while he read a book. Martel chose the other side of Rod while Sigrid brought her tray over to sit next to Selim.

The rocket ship was passing through a phase where there was a slight bit of gravitational disturbance. Twice Hideko had to jab a fork into Ruskin's steak to keep it from crawling out of the electronic oven.

She giggled as Ruskin said dryly, "Stick it again. I think the thing is still alive."

Rod was having difficulty in salting his food. Some of it wanted to hang over his plate like a cloud.

Heinrich had set his roll aside to turn a page and did not pick it up immediately. At this point Martel became disconcerted.

"I have no bread," he complained.

Before Sigrid could rise to get him some, Heinrich's roll began to drift. It did not float through the air, but moved down the table, skirting Rod's plate, and drifted over to Martel. He spotted it, grabbed it up matter-of-factly, and while Rod gave a double take, broke it in two buttered it, and started to eat it with considerable relish.

Sigrid watched him, amused. "Come to think of it, I thought you had a toothache," she said to him.

Martel gave a little shrug. "It is gone now," he said. "I cured it."

Sigrid opened her mouth and gave him an incredulous look.

Rod blinked. "*You* cured it?"

"But of course. It was *my* toothache, wasn't it?" He spread a bit of jam on his roll and took another big bite.

Sigrid looked at him as if he were hopeless. She and Selim exchanged a private laugh.

Ruskin slid into a place on the other side of Heinrich. Heinrich glanced up pleased and closed his book. He liked this David Ruskin.

"Good," said Heinrich. "I can remember when Science claimed that men who travelled in space would have to live on food pills."

"But the human body needs at least two pounds of bulk a day," said Rod. He glanced at the fast disappearing food on Martel's plate and added, "And I know somebody who doesn't have to worry about that."

"Times change, don't they, Professor?" smiled Ruskin.

"And so does Science, my boy," said Heinrich. "It's hard to believe this now, but most scientists once laughed at me when I said I hoped to live long enough to go to the moon."

Ruskin chuckled. "Well, you got your wish—and the last laugh, too."

They smiled at one another.

"How old are you, boy?" Heinrich asked.

"Twenty-six."

"And I am fifty-eight. You're young enough to be my son."

Ruskin nodded pleasantly.

And everybody noticed that they were indeed like father and son.

Sigrid, sitting next to Dr. Hamid, glanced at him, and then away. He took a bite and nodded, pleased.

"You are a good cook," he said.

"That was nothing," said Sigrid, lightly. "You should take my home cooking some day."

Selim looked at her and said almost to himself, "Yes, I would love to." Then, as if he had suddenly become aware of where they were, he added a little soberly, "If we ever get back again."

Sigrid was completely taken aback; she didn't dare say a word. But why was her heart pounding this way? And why did she feel so lighthearted? She fought at this and felt a mixture of doubt, fear and excitement. She would not have it. She would not fall in love like a silly high school girl.

Besides, her life was all planned. She was a top physicist, a physician and research chemist, and she would not have her career ruined and be tied down to marriage and a family.

A little voice in her said, oh yes you would, Sigrid. You are all woman and you know it. She said to herself that there was this surgeon back in Stockholm whenever she was ready to settle down. Oscar was understanding; he would not prevent her from going on with her career. And he fitted in well with her relatives and circle of friends.

She stole another look at the Turk. Besides, she was not ready for anything like that yet, and she had no intentions of getting involved with this dark, romantic man.

Be still, pounding heart.

Rod began to sing, and she was grateful to him for breaking up her thoughts.

"CAR—O—LINA MOON ..." wailed Rod out of tune. "I'm pin—ing ... Pining for the place I long to be ..."

"*Sacre Bleu*," said Martel. "The eardrums!"

Rochester had just come down the ladder. "Easy there, old boy. You're vibrating the ship." He held up a palm to Sigrid who started to get up.

"Stay put," he told her. "I'm a bachelor, you know. Used to my own cooking anyway." He took a steak out of the freezer and began cooking it on the electronic oven.

Rod had fallen silent.

"Don't you know any rock and roll?" Hideko encouraged him.

"I'm a jazz fan," said Rod. "But I thought I would concentrate on moon songs. Blue moon. Harvest Moon. Moon over Miami. Old songs that we all knew and could sing together."

"We're not that *old*," laughed Sigrid.

Rod shrugged. "What have we got for dessert?"

The earth was smaller now, like a beautiful, elaborate Christmas tree ornament, but with the continents still plainly visible.

But it was the moon that was beginning to dominate their part of the universe. It was getting big and round and beautiful, a stark white in the rays of sun.

Some hours had passed since dinner and Hideko and Sigrid had become a little weary of staring at it through the porthole and the electronic telescope and had decided to take a shower.

Sigrid had finished and sat in her slip in front of the single mirror brushing and primping her blonde hair.

She hummed a happy little tune.

"Do you always sing to yourself?" asked Hideko, getting into the shower stall. "What is that little tune anyway?"

"Just a Swedish folk song," said Sigrid. "A kind of love song."

"You're kind of sweet on Dr. Hamid, aren't you?" smiled Hideko. "How does this shower work?"

"Is it that obvious? Heavens! Just turn the little knob, Hideko. You don't have to worry about hot or cold water on this one."

"I heard that Dr. Hamid had been divorced three times, Sigrid."

"Please," begged Sigrid. "He's handsome, dark and romantic, and I'm attracted to him. Wouldn't any woman be? But that's as far as it is going. I have complete control of my emotions."

A contented smile was upon Hideko's face. "I feel like Rod," she said. "I want to sing at the top of my lungs."

For it was a very unusual shower—a shower with no water spray. Instead, there were air spray-jets with ultrasonic sound.

"Isn't it marvellous, Hideko?" Sigrid raved. "So much more soothing and practical than water, and you get massaged at the same time by air spray-jets. When I get back to Stockholm, I'm certainly going to have one installed in my apartment."

"Me too—when I get back to Tokyo. I wonder if you could wash your hair with this?"

"I imagine so. But it might tangle it, so I wouldn't want to try it right now."

"You have such pretty hair," said Hideko.

Sigrid applied lipstick. "Do you have a boy-friend, Hideko?"

Hideko sighed. "Sort of. His name is Joe and he is general manager of a factory that makes radios. But I don't know ..."

"That's the way I feel. He's nice to fall back on." Sigrid shook her head. "I shouldn't talk that way. But up here you seem so remote and far away."

"I know," agreed Hideko. "It frightens you. I think I am more afraid of the possibility of not getting back to Earth than anything. It is not dying that frightens me. I just want to be buried in the ground on earth—and not go floating through space for ever."

"Oh, Hideko," laughed Sigrid. "Get those morbid thoughts out of your pretty little head."

The Japanese woman turned the ultra-sound off and stepped out of the shower, modestly clutching a large bath towel in front of her.

The door to the bathroom swung open just then and they turned to look. In the doorway, partly in the room, stood Captain John Anderson.

His face turned a crimson red. "Oh. Sorry, ladies," he stammered.

Hideko clutched her towel to her.

Sigrid frowned at him and said, slightly annoyed. "You could knock."

"I'm very sorry," said Anderson, standing on first one foot then the other.

Then he grinned slightly. "You know, Heinrich is a genius, but he forgot to include a lock for the bathroom door. Besides ..." he added defensively, "we're not at the Waldorf, you know."

Embarrassed, he grinned at Hideko. She returned his smile shyly and he withdrew, closing the door.

Chapter Six

EVERYTHING had been going smoothly. Vargas and Anderson were at their posts, relaxing with steaming mugs of coffee.

Vargas swung around and raised his voice a little to avoid using the intercom. "We're directly on course to orbit over the crater of Menelaus," he said to Anderson.

Anderson checked his watch with the chronometer and nodded. "Let's see ... Another twelve hours and thirty-seven minutes, to be exact, and we should begin retro-procedure for landing."

He leaned back in his chair and took a sip of coffee. He was aware, at that moment, out of the corner of his eye, of a slight disturbance on the radar panel. Before he could turn around to seize up the situation. Makonnen's strong voice came over the intercom.

"Forward scan radar panel shows approaching micrometeor field," he announced tersely. "Impossible to avoid. Repeat: Impossible to avoid!"

Anderson slammed his coffee mug down with a splash and switched on the intercom.

"Affirmative, Stargazer. Break-through alert! Signal condition red! Prepare set up for penetration rockets. On the double!"

Anderson turned quickly to the radar-scope. It was indicating nublia-like clouds of microscopic dust. There was no doubt about it. They were registering all over the scope.

Orloff stood behind Anderson looking at the scope. His face was ashen. "You'll never steer around that, my friend! And when it hits ..." He made a little motion with his thumb toward his throat.

Sigrid had been passing by and overheard the Russian. She froze in her tracks, her face stiffening with fright.

No one on A-Deck moved. The cats sensed danger in the air. They began to spit and growl.

Vargas hurriedly set controls and dials for opening the outer lock, and setting for firing of the dispersal rocket. He felt all thumbs in his haste. Sweat ran down his face and dripped off his nose. This meteor cloud was coming at them so fast ... like Death with its arms reaching out for them.

He could hear the grind as the motors drove the door open, the hum and then a click. A little red light on his panel blinked on.

“Outer door open,” Vargas announced in a hoarse voice. “Ready to fire!”

Anderson was concentrating on instruments. He said to Vargas over the intercom, “Preset timing fuse to one point five, five minutes.”

“One point five five,” repeated Vargas. “On setting. Still ready.”

Anderson watched a bubble on the panel come slowly to the centre line. “Not much time. We’d better use a five second count down.”

Vargas stood by nervous and tense, ready to press the button.

Anderson said over the intercom, “Five and counting —*four—three—two—one—Fire!*”

The instruments recorded the amount of dispersal. Anderson did some quick figuring in his head. It was going to be close.

Vargas’ voice over the intercom, said, “Second set up ready.”

“No time,” said Anderson. “Approaching field. We’ll have to make it as it is. To all crew members: Keep all hands off metal surfaces! Interior of cabin may become electrically charged. I repeat: Interior of cabin may become electrically charged!”

David Ruskin and Rod Murdoch joined Orloff behind Captain Anderson.

“I hope the hole is big enough to let us through,” said Rod.

“Well, at least we won’t have long to wonder about it,” Ruskin replied.

The *Lunar Eagle 1* began to move through the hole its dispersal rocket had blasted through the cloud. It was swallowed up by it, surrounded by radiation dust. The hole began to narrow down and the cloud to gradually squeeze in on the ship.

Electrical sparks bounced inside the cabin. A sand blasting sound came from outside the ship. The hole was closing again.

Sigrid began to weep softly.

There was a sudden mingle of screams from the already terrified cats over in their cages. The electrical charges were making their hair stand on end. Rodolpho arched his back like a Hallowe’en cat, his tail thick and furry, his eyes blazing. Mimi huddled deeper into the corner, miaowing and spitting.

Captain Anderson literally sweated it out. There was nothing more he could do now but sit tight. Sit tight and wait. And if they did not make it out of the cloud—he shuddered. It wouldn’t be the easiest way to die he could think of. They would be swept along with the cloud, receiving electrical shocks and lethal doses of radiation until they died from it, or their recirculation motors quit and they suffocated from lack of oxygen. Whatever way, he knew it would not be pleasant.

And back home they would wait and watch, and wonder what happened to them, and eventually give them up for dead and try with another rocket ship. Perhaps the next one would be luckier, or better able to handle emergencies that arose like this.

As suddenly as it had hit the micro dust, the *Lunar Eagle* escaped.

The electrical fireworks ceased. Rodolpho gave one last loud miaouw of protest, then began to relax, his fur and Mimi's becoming smooth again.

The crew members were slow to recover from the shock. There was a moment of stunned silence, then Makonnen's voice boomed deep and strong over the intercom from B-Deck. "Captain, we went through that like a slippery bar of soap!"

Somebody laughed a little too loud.

Rod turned quickly to Orloff, a proud smile on his face. "This is *our* invention."

Orloff had moved to the other side of the cabin. He turned and threw Rod a playful semi-salute.

"Hold it," yelled Vargas. "We're not out of the woods yet! Look at that scintillator dial! We've got radiation inside the ship."

The gauge indicating presence of radiation had been working overtime in the micro-dust. Now the needle was still leaning far over.

"Check!" snapped Anderson.

He checked his own instrument which had several settings and was more precise. He adjusted it to a less sensitive setting and watched the needle slowly move out of the red.

"We're okay," he announced. "Just a little shot of radiation. No more than a couple of X-rays. And it's wearing off fast now."

He looked over at Vargas, feeling limp. "Relieve me, will you, Vargas? Get the second pilot to take your post."

Vargas nodded and switched on the intercom. "First Pilot to Second—requesting relief."

"Righto," called Rochester. "Be right there."

In a few moments after the ship had cleared the microcloud, Anderson could think of nothing but that shower, and now, stripped, he stood in the shower stall, enjoying the cleansing, relaxing benefit of the air jets and ultrasound waves.

After a few minutes, his big frame loosened and he could feel the tightness go out of his muscles. He rubbed at his blond, crew-cut hair and wondered if the girls had found out that you could get a hair wash in the process, without the annoyance of wet hair.

Refreshed and feeling clean again, he turned off the shower and

stepped out of the stall, grabbing a towel as he remembered the lack of a lock on the door. He stood in the dressing room for a moment, looking around. The room was barren. His change of clothes was not hanging on the wall there.

“Rod!” he called. “Did I leave my change of clothes out there?”

Hideko was just coming down the companionway. She paused as she heard Anderson’s voice repeating, “Are my clothes out there, Rod?”

The clothes, neatly arranged, were strapped against the wall at Hideko’s hand. She glanced quickly round. Rod, Heinrich and Ruskin were sitting at a table, deeply absorbed in the solving of a mathematical formula.

She did not want to disturb the boy. Hesitating only a moment, she unstrapped the fresh change of attire and took it to the shower and dressing room.

Anderson, seeing the door start to open, came forward, holding the towel in front of him.

“Rod, bring me my ...” he started to say. He broke off realising that Hideko was the one bringing him his clothes.

He flashed a little grin at her. Hideko smiled modestly at him.

“Here are your fresh clothes, Captain Anderson.” She held out the hanger. He struggled desperately to wrap and tie the towel around his middle, grateful that he had thought to grab it, and took his clothes.

“Thank you,” he grinned. “I guess this makes us even, doesn’t it—Hideko?”

She nodded, smiling, and withdrew. He looked after her with a pleased smile.

Chapter Seven

ASMARA MAKONNEN was at his navigator's post, humming to himself, looking out upon the universe through his telescope.

The universe was a black infinity with myriads of steady, bright stars. He turned the electronic scope on the planet Mars, and studied the tiny, dull red ball. After the moon, Mars would be next, he supposed.

Rod came by and when Makonnen looked up the boy smiled and asked, "They keeping you busy, Asmara?"

Makonnen nodded cordially. "Yes, Rod, they keep a navigator very busy. They want spectrographic studies of all the suns in sight, spacial distances checked with the radar and of course the navigational duties."

"All those billions of stars out there," said Rod. "Sometimes it makes you feel kind of puny just going to the moon and back."

"Yes, Rod, if you want to look at it that way. But think of all the countless centuries on Earth, from primitive times to the present. Man could do no more than stare at the moon and wonder about it. But we are going there."

"Yes, just think of it. I used to lie in bed back home in Kansas City and stare at the moon. My bed was by the window. I used to hate it when it went behind a cloud. I wished I could be like Peter Pan and just sail out of the window and land on the moon."

"I wonder how we'll feel," said Makonnen, "when we get back to earth and look up at it. How is it going to seem?"

"I don't know," replied Rod. "Maybe it will hold more magic than ever for us. And maybe we won't dare to look at it."

"Magic," sighed Makonnen. "My father believed in magic. And my mother was like me. She had a sixth sense, a psychic power as it were."

"Like the cats," said Rod. "They seem to know when something is up."

"Like the cats—perhaps. I cannot explain it in my case, except that often I know when something is wrong before the others do. But let's change the subject. Are you going up again, when we get back?"

"Definitely," said Rod. "*If* we get back."

Makonnen slapped Rod heartily on the arm. "Of course we will. I've been in outer space three times before. Each time our space ships get

better and bigger. Soon they will have commercial ships and freighters out here moving back and forth.”

“Will you be navigator on one of them?” Rod asked.

Makonnen wrinkled his face. “Too tame. Too tame, Rod. I’ll stick with the exploratory jobs, heading for the stars. Some day, Rod, perhaps the children of your grandchildren will see it, they’ll be finding worlds to settle. Not on this solar system, for Mars and Venus and the lot are not suitable for that. But some day, somewhere in the universe ...”

Anderson’s voice came through on the intercom. “Rod, you’re wanted on A-Deck.”

“I’ve got to go,” said Rod. “It was nice talking to you. I have a hunch I’ll be on that exploratory ship with you some day in the future.”

Makonnen smiled broadly and held out a black hand.

“Shake on it.”

When Rod left Makonnen went back to the telescope and began to softly hum an old Nigerian folk song. He turned the telescope on Earth and could make out the continent of Africa. So far, far away.

He was deep in his thoughts when Anderson patted his shoulder. Without saying a word, Makonnen moved aside, enough for him to have a long look.

They smiled at each other with the understanding of long friends. “Old Mother Earth!” said Anderson. “From here she looks very small and insignificant, doesn’t she, Stargazer.”

Makonnen nodded. “Very small, John, very insignificant. I wonder what they’re doing down there.”

Anderson replied with an ironic twinkle, “Probably watching us. Well, I’d better relieve Vargas—to get ready for turnover.”

He climbed up the ladder to A-Deck, jerked a thumb at Vargas for him to take his relief, and took his seat at the control board.

Switching on the intercom, he made the announcement that the ship was about to begin the process of reversing itself in order to be in the correct position to land on the moon.

“Safety harness will not be necessary,” he added, “But *I* strongly suggest that everybody find something to hang on to.”

Vargas had seen Hideko standing by herself near the wall, looking a little helpless and nervous. He made his way over to her.

“This won’t be bad,” he assured her. “Just leaning against the wall is enough. I’ve gone through this several times before.”

She nodded and looked relieved.

“Sometimes,” she said, “I get to wondering if we will hit the moon at all. I’ve been watching at the TV and it seems way over to one side—as though we would shoot right past it.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Vargas smiled. “It’s coming through space to meet us at 2,300 miles per hour.”

Hideko looked startled.

“We have to aim where we know it will be,” he explained. “Like a hunter aiming ahead of the ducks. And the earth revolves on its axis at one thousand miles per hour and is hurtling through space at 66,600 miles per hour, so it’s no easy task. That’s why we have Heinrich and Rod busy with paper and pencil all the time.”

Slowly, gracefully, the *Lunar Eagle 1* began to reverse ends, so that the top cone pointed back in the general direction of Earth and the landing gear and rockets would be in the right position for the moon.

As the ship righted itself, Hideko’s foot slipped and she fell slightly towards Vargas. With one arm he grabbed her and steadied her.

She looked up at him gratefully; he smiled down at her with a lover’s eyes. His other arm came around her. Embarrassed, she looked down at his hands embracing her.

Reluctantly, he withdrew his hands.

She allowed him a smile and then said softly, “Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure—Hideko,” he said. He took her chin gently in his hand and tilted her face. “You did get over your depression—about the universe out there, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” she replied with a calm smile. “I compared it in my mind to the Zen Buddhists and their landscaping. Their gardens are austere and tranquil. They feel they can meditate better in such a garden than in a sunny, cheerful one. That must be how God feels about the universe.”

“Good,” breathed Vargas. “In a way, that is how I feel, too.”

They could not help but look at one another, drawn to each other, but each abstaining from touching the other.

Sigrid, who had looked on, had caught and understood the entire moment.

Anderson’s voice came over the intercom. “To all personnel: We will be landing in minus two hours and thirty-eight minutes. Turnover now complete. That is all.”

Vargas went to the foot of the ladder to A-Deck, waiting for Hideko, who quickly moved to it, ascended it, with Vargas following.

Makonnen stood up, stretched like a jungle cat and yawned, then followed up the ladder.

Sigrid was aware now that most of the crew was on A-Deck. The Television camera had been turned on the general area where they expected to land and most of the crew members were crowded around the screen.

Selim had stayed below with her and came up behind her now. She was aware of his presence, but did not turn around to face him.

She felt his fingers close gently around her arms, and felt the electricity from him. She felt his breath on her neck.

"Your hair is so soft," he said.

"Please," she replied stiffly.

Hamid said. "Sigrid, I ... I want you to know how I feel about you ..."

Her heart skipped a beat, but she did not wish to encourage him. Not here and now.

She turned coolly to him and cut him off by saying, "Please, Dr. Hamid. We are scientists on an important expedition. Personal emotions should not interfere with our duties."

"I would give anything to be alone with you this very minute," whispered Selim.

She made an attempt to stave off any further advances. "On Earth or the Moon?" she asked coquettishly.

Selim answered seriously, "That isn't important. Wherever we shall find happiness. Let the decision remain with Allah."

She looked at him, unable to speak. She was a tigress. Her blue eyes were full of fire; her lips trembled. She turned, hurrying to the ladder-well, and climbed up to A-Deck.

Selim followed her with his eyes. He knew for certain now that she was attracted to him and afraid to be alone with him because she could not trust herself. But he smiled to himself, knowing that he could wait—and that the time would come.

Chapter Eight

THE *Lunar Eagle 1* was beginning to close in on the moon now.

On B-Deck Dr. Heinrich sat at a table figuring out some last minute calculations, with David Ruskin and Rod Murdoch seated next to him.

Sigrid and Rochester sat at the other end of the cabin, near the porthole, computing a problem in chemical physics.

Heinrich said, "Rod, the formula for rate of deceleration for your landing on the moon ..."

Rod replied instantly, "That's easy. X over G-3, considering Moon's gravitational attraction would be one-sixth that of Earth."

Ruskin looked at the boy in awe and checked the answers in a book.

"That's absolutely right," said Ruskin in an amazed tone of voice.

"Of course it is," said Heinrich absent-mindedly. "Rod is always right."

"Amazing," said Ruskin. He shrugged. "Of course, you know, the original calculation was determined thirty-three years ago by Bernhauer in Vienna. Ironical, isn't it, that for all of his brilliance this Bernhauer could have been such a Nazi beast. He was directly responsible for the extermination of more than a hundred thousand of my people in Poland."

He turned to Rod grimly and continued in a hard voice, "Do you know that he gave the order to try out the V-2 rocket to see if the rocket would work ... on Polish towns. The Gestapo forced villagers of my town to stay in their homes during one of the practices." His voice cracked a little with emotion. "The 'V' bomb worked perfectly. It killed my own mother, father, brothers and sisters."

"Oh my God," said Rod. Then he looked over at Heinrich, confused.

Heinrich looked ill. He was tense and white.

"But Dr. Heinrich is ..." Rod began.

Sigrid and Rochester had quickly glanced at one another and now Sigrid called to Rod.

"Rod, come quickly. We're stuck!"

Rod got up and went over to them at once.

Sigrid put an arm around his shoulders confidently.

She spoke in a discreet whisper. "Rod, dear," she told him, "Dr. Ruskin doesn't know that Dr. Heinrich's own father was Bernhauer."

Rod's eyes widened in understanding.

“Heinrich was so ashamed of what his father did that he changed his name,” explained Rochester in a low whisper.

“Don’t let Dr. Ruskin know, dear,” said Sigrid. “See how well they work together, without knowing. Almost like father and son.”

They looked over at the two men. They were working together closely in complete compatibility.

Rochester smiled grimly. “Yes, let’s not rake up all that old muck.”

Rod nodded thoughtfully in agreement.

On A-Deck Captain Anderson sat back relaxed in his leather captain’s chair as he inspected some photographs taken by Rochester of the moon’s crater of Menelaus. They were enlargements of pictures that were taken from five hundred miles up.

He nodded to himself as he saw no reason why they should not land there. He wondered what it would be like. Would the surface be soft, or hard? Were the scientists’ theories about the moon correct, or would they find that they were utterly wrong? It excited him immensely to know that they would soon be finding out for themselves.

He picked up the intercom mike and spoke into it. “Captain Anderson to entire personnel: Prepare for landing.”

Putting down the intercom mike, he went to work. He studied the two radar altimeters on the panel above his head. They indicated the decreasing altitude and rate of descent. Each was lowering steadily, but a little too fast.

He gave the rockets a little burst and the *Lunar Eagle 1* slowed down to his satisfaction.

Vargas came over to his side. “Aren’t you going to have the crew strap in?” he asked worriedly.

“No need,” Anderson replied. “We’ll come down as gently as an air-taxi helicopter.”

“If the instruments should happen to be a little off ...” ventured Vargas.

Anderson grinned at him. “Stop worrying, Luis. We’ll supplement them with the television camera. We’ll see right where we’re going, and how far we are from the moon’s surface. We’ll be fine.”

Vargas nodded and returned to his post.

As the *Lunar Eagle 1* approached the moon’s surface, four spindly shock absorber legs were ejected automatically halfway of their length from the body of the rocket ship. An electric eye had “seen” the ground below and triggered their release.

The crew had assembled on A-Deck and there was an almost festive air of excitement among some of them; nervousness and tension in others.

Ruskin had noticed how nervous Hideko was. "Forgive me," he told her in a half light-hearted manner, "But I used to write science fiction, and I am also considered somewhat of a poetic type. I cannot help but think that we must resemble a big spider coming down a strand of web."

Orloff said dryly, "And excuse me for eavesdropping, but from a realistic point of view, a spider has more than four legs."

A shudder ran along Hideko's spine. "I cannot help but feel that we are the victims and the Moon is the spider's web."

Vargas stepped up behind her. "We are simply scientists, come in peace to explore, and then return home. We'll be on our way back before you know it."

Anderson watched the altimeter and TV screen, one finger poised over the switch buttons on the master control board. He spoke into the intercom again.

"Altitude, one hundred feet."

The television view of the moon's surface was clear. Its pumice covered ground stood out in needle-sharp relief.

All four telescopic shock-absorbent legs now dropped from the bottom of the ship. Long rocket flames began to splash out, as Anderson fed the rocket more fuel to slow their descent.

The four-spider-like legs now shot out their full length.

And then the television screen began to blur.

"We can't see the ground!" Vargas cried. "The rockets are stirring up dust."

Anderson hesitated only a moment, then opened up the throttles. They could feel the bite of the thrust as the rockets took hold, and then the ship began to move slowly up and away from the moon.

Anderson picked up the intercom mike. "All personnel to your contour bunks! Strap yourself in."

He waited a reasonable time. It was foolish, perhaps, but a poor landing could throw them to the floor and there was no sense in risking injuries.

He glanced over his shoulder. All were in their bunks except Vargas, who sat relaxed in the first pilot's chair.

"Makonnen," he said into the mike. "How's B-Deck?"

"Wait a second," said Makonnen. "All right. They're all in but me, John."

“Check, Stargazer.”

He took her down slowly again, watching the altimeter and TV camera.

The rockets roared noiselessly. They sank down into the dust and the green rocket flames died down, expired. There was absolutely no sound of anything. Not even an atomic blast could have been heard.

Inside the ship, only a slight bump was felt. Anderson sat limply while the crew members unstrapped from their bunks.

They swarmed back up from B-Deck and when Anderson swung around to face them his eyes were glinting triumphantly.

“This is a great historic occasion,” he said. “We have landed on the moon.”

Chapter Nine

THE realisation of what they had accomplished began to hit home.

Hideko bowed her head.

Vargas looked at her in awe and crossed himself.

“Mein Gott, wir haben es geschafft,” said Heinrich with feeling.

Selim Hamid said almost to himself, “Allah be praised!”

Orloff, standing next to him, said sharply. “Praise this ship, not Allah!”

Anderson had turned to the radio controls, and spoke into the mike.

“Lunar Eagle 1 to Earth Control. Come in, Earth Control.”

A voice answered, sounding faint and very far away. “Earth Control to *Lunar Eagle 1*. Over.”

Anderson realised that it was taking their voices a second to reach back and forth. Radio waves travelled with the speed of light, which was 186,000 miles a second. But they were over a quarter of a million miles away from the planet Earth.

He said excitedly, but his voice still military, *“Lunar Eagle 1. Captain Anderson speaking. Reporting successful landing on Moon ... time as calculated, plus thirty-two minutes. Preparing now for first Lunar disembarkation. Next scheduled contact with Earth Control at oh-two hundred.”*

“Congratulations, Lunar Eagle 1,” replied the voice after a second’s pause. “Stand by now for Secretary General of the United Peace Congress.”

There was a pause.

The Secretary General’s voice came through heavy with emotion. “Thank God you made it, Captain.” Gaining Control, he said, “Speaking for all the peoples of Earth whom you and your crew represent, our heartiest congratulations ... for this first great step in the exploration of space. God speed in your work ...”

A crew of ten had assembled on D-Deck and were donning their space suits. They were in various stages of getting into them, but except for their headpieces, Anderson, Makonnen and Vargas were ready.

Martel and Ruskin were to remain, and so were not dressed in their outer space full-pressure suits.

Anderson picked up his transparent headpiece, and before fitting it on, looked carefully over the group, face to face.

“Check all of your equipment with extreme care,” he advised. “And double-check your supply of oxygen. There is enough in every tank for two hours’ stay upon the surface of the moon.”

Anderson turned and saw Hideko petrified with fear, unable to move. He went to her reassuringly, took her hand and led her. She smiled up at him with her usual shy manner.

“Remember,” Anderson said to all, “you must develop an additional reflex action. Because of the fact that there is no air on the moon, there can be no sound at all. At all times, have your suit two-way radio in working order, or you cannot speak, nor can you be heard.”

He paused and turned to Vargas and Makonnen.

“Let’s check our equipment, Makonnen ... radio check ... Anderson to Makonnen ... radio check ...”

“Check,” said Makonnen calmly.

Anderson said, “You will carry our bomblets.”

“Check,” said Makonnen.

Anderson said to Vargas, “All right, oxygen and radio check.”

“Check,” said Vargas.

“You will carry our magnetic meteorite deflectors,” Anderson told him. “Remember when we hit the surface of the moon, establish a four point perimeter ... at least one hundred yards from the ship.”

“Right, Captain,” said Vargas.

Anderson said, “Selim ... you are carrying the air detector.”

“Yes ... check,” said Selim.

“Hideko. Emergency kit.”

“Check.”

“Okay,” said Anderson. “I guess that just about covers it.”

He pointed at Vargas and Makonnen. “The three of us hit the airlock first.”

They fitted on their transparent headpieces, Anderson picked up a rolled up flag, a pick and a cold lamp.

Makonnen stooped down and picked up a container of the bomblets. He smiled a little to himself as he remembered Martel with one of these containers over his head, back when they had passed through the eddy of magnetic currents.

Vargas picked up a box of magnet blocks. They opened the door, entered the airlock, closing the door carefully behind them. A light at the side of the door immediately glowed red.

At first it was pitch-black. There was only a slight hum of the compressor. Then Vargas lighted one of the cold lamps, and they could see each other dimly, almost in silhouette, as they waited for

the compressor to suck out the air.

Their full pressure suits began to bulge slightly under the decreasing ambient pressure. The hum died down.

Anderson moved to the exit door, it slowly opened, and he was the first to get a look at the cold grey of the moon.

He took a step toward the ladder and slowly started to descend. Makonnen gave Vargas a little push and a nod, then followed closely after him, shutting the door behind him.

Anderson came off the ladder to become the first man in the history of the earth to set foot on the moon. It was an odd sensation. It felt eerie. His feet sank slightly, noiselessly, and it seemed to Anderson for all the world like stepping on a mound of egg shells. All that was lacking was the crunching sound. There was no sound at all.

Anderson moved away from the base of the ladder as Vargas came down.

He stood watching the men, his two buddies, who had been through so much with him, and wondered if they had the same funny little feeling of awe and a kind of half elation.

Their steps, as they moved to join him, were light and buoyant, their faces taut but expressionless.

Makonnen got down on his hands and knees, and for a brief startled moment Anderson thought he was going to pray. The big black man thoughtfully gathered up pumice dust in his huge hands, then let it sift back to the ground, where it slowly settled, with no cloud of dust. He looked at it wonderingly, child-like, and got to his feet.

There was not a sound of anything. They huddled together, all looking up.

They had landed in the crater of Menelaus, near the base of it, and the volcanic walls stretched up jaggedly ten thousand feet high.

A brilliant sun just barely peeked over the wall on one side. With the sun in any other position it would be too hot or too cold for them to be able to exist outside the protective hull of the space ship.

Overhead, the stars shone constantly, with no twinkling, in a black as ink sky. It seemed as though there were almost as many of them as grains of sand, and their glow was hard, cold, diamond-like.

“Look,” said Vargas, pointing.

Far in the distance, shedding its earthlight, was the planet from which they had come—Earth.

Vargas continued to stare at it. “Do you suppose that we’ll ever get back there?” he asked no one in particular. He sighed, in a fit of temporary depression. “It seems so terribly far away. So terribly far away, our mother earth.”

“Of course we’ll make it back,” said Anderson, “Don’t ever think that way.”

“You know,” remarked Makonnen. “I’d give just about anything right now to hear a bird sing, and to see just a single beam of yellow sunlight.”

Vargas shook himself out of his depression and began to run, bounding almost as if in slow motion at times, to place the four magnet blocks around the ship. He connected a switch and fuses, and an electric current sparked out.

Suddenly, breaking through their feeling of awe, a few meteors flashed by. They landed near the magnet boxes with no noise.

The second group of three, Heinrich Orloff and Sigrid, had come down the ladder. The remaining members were descending.

Hideko had just set foot on the moon. She had seen the meteor fragments flash by and was frightened. She drew back, momentarily very afraid.

Anderson went immediately to her.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said soothingly. “These magnets are strong enough to attract the meteors.”

Hideko nodded nervously, reassured.

Orloff said, “Let’s just hope they don’t come any bigger.”

Anderson shot him a look and moved away, the others following him, looking about, awed by the silence and by what they saw.

“Look at the height of this crater rim,” gasped Sigrid, staring up at it.

“That’s nothing,” said Rod. “Do you know there are mountains on the moon that are twenty-seven thousand feet high? And that is something when you consider the moon is only one-sixth the size of the earth.”

Anderson moved off a few paces, carrying the flag under his arm. Makonnen followed him. He stopped suddenly and looked searchingly about him, shivering slightly, his face screwed up in a frown. It was as though someone had stepped on his grave.

Anderson looked at Makonnen apprehensively. He knew this man well enough, and while he had his superstitions, he had an almost psychic power to sense when things were not right.

“What is it, Stargazer?” he asked.

“I don’t know ...” said Makonnen softly. “It’s the strangest feeling. I can’t help sensing it. As if ...”

“As if what?”

“It couldn’t be, of course.” Makonnen tried to reason. “But it’s as if

... the oddest feeling ... as if we were being watched.”

Anderson scowled, puzzled. “I know—but there’s nothing ... not a living thing. Just look around you, Asmara. Doesn’t this barren place confirm what scientists have declared for years ... that life is impossible on the moon? Not a living thing, Makonnen. I doubt if there is even the simplest kind of plant life here. Nothing at all. No one but us.”

“I know,” said Makonnen, “My reasoning tells me that, too.” He shivered. “But something cold inside me tells me different.”

Anderson shrugged. He unfurled the flag of the United Peace Congress, and drove it into the pumice dust. The flag hung limply on its basal stick; there was no wind to make it wave proudly, but his crew was aware of its significance. He stretched it out full for all to see, and then let it fall to hang limply again. It was a sad, pitiful little flag and he would always remember it that way.

He was pleased to see that all the crew stood in respectful reverence.

After a few moments the group dispersed. Makonnen and Vargas set about to rig up a rocket for a flare.

Orloff and Heinrich walked over to Anderson.

“This seems to be in an unmarked valley,” said Anderson. “Is it familiar to you, Dr. Orloff?”

“No,” replied Orloff. “To my knowledge it has never been marked on any lunar map.”

Vargas and Makonnen had set up their rocket. Vargas ignited it and they stepped back as it shot off into moon space.

It flared out redly in the black sky, the power in it bursting swiftly into flight and it hurled up and away, a tiny disappearing red flare in the black infinity of space.

“Do you suppose they’ll see that from Earth?” Rod said aloud in his suit mike to no one in particular. He shook his head in wonderment. “They have headlines about us in every paper in the world,” he said. “Yet it all seems so remote ... so remote.”

Anderson stood looking at the rocket glare until it was only a pinhead of colour. He turned, then, and looked over and up the walls of the crater. We are in a bowl, he thought, with sides ten thousand feet high, straight up. He wondered how long it would be before men would be coming here to climb these mountains and crater walls. They looked slick, unclimbable, then he remembered that a man of 180 pounds on earth weighed only sixty pounds here on the moon. That would help; perhaps, in fact, make it too easy for the experts.

He thought for a moment that he had actually seen something move on the crater wall. He blinked his eyes and looked again. He was imagining things; letting his thoughts run away with him.

Bill Rochester was standing with Sigrid. They were both staring up and around them.

Rochester was deep in reflective thought, but for a moment there he had imagined that a shadow of some kind had crossed over his face. What was it about it here that gave him this morbid feeling of depression? He had never felt quite this way before.

He looked into Sigrid's calm face. She couldn't be feeling the same way; it was just him, then. Sigrid seemed almost unaware of his presence. Her beautiful face was radiant, but expressionless. It was almost as though she was lost in another world, excited under a hypnotic trance.

"Sigrid ...?" he murmured. He waved a gloved hand slowly in front of her eyes.

She turned to him reluctantly, as though forcing herself away from something.

"Yes, Bill?"

"I can't help feeling ..." he said. "I can hardly explain it ... it's the strangest sensation; like thoughts racing through my brain. I keep feeling like ... like it's the end of everything."

Sigrid looking into his face. "Or the beginning!" she exclaimed. "Couldn't it be that kind of a feeling, Bill?"

Rochester shook his head, looking very sober. "No. It's like ... like death."

Sigrid said simply, "With me, it's like life."

They looked at one another in wonderment, and then out into the unknown.

Chapter Ten

“ALL right now,” announced Captain Anderson, “We’ve all had a good chance to look things over. But if we’re going to do any real exploring here on the moon, I think we’d better begin. Remember, we have only two hours supply of oxygen in our tanks.”

The group, led by Captain Anderson, started forward. They hadn’t gone too far from the rocket ship when suddenly, in the area toward which they were walking, spurts of small pebbles from above cut the surface of the moon like buckshot.

The group stopped in alarm.

“Meteors!” somebody yelled.

In the background there was a tiny explosion, and a medium sized moon rock fell to the surface of the moon, taking one bounce noiselessly.

It was followed immediately by a giant rock. It bounced toward them in grotesque slow motion like a giant rubber ball. For a brief second it looked as though it were about to snuff out all ten of them in one crushing bounce.

There were cries of violent fright and panic. Hideko screamed and clutched tightly to Anderson, burying her face in his chest.

Then it veered off slowly to come to a stop.

Anderson, somewhat taken aback by Hideko’s embrace, managed to free himself. He quickly gave Vargas a knowing signal.

“Vargas,” he ordered. “Stake out this area with magnet buoys.”

He turned to Orloff. “This is when you take charge of the exploration, Dr. Orloff.”

Vargas immediately, running lightly, laid out four magnet buoys in a square area, while the group waited, casting apprehensive eyes at the black sky.

He came back in a few minutes, a little out of breath. “That ought to keep this square clear of any further danger ... from falling meteors ...” he wheezed.

Anderson said sternly, “If anybody goes outside this magnetized area, remember,” and he nodded significantly, “you take your own life in your hands. Okay, Orloff.”

“Everybody please attend to your pre-arranged duties,” said Orloff drily. “And if anybody finds any unusual mineral deposits, please report to me immediately.”

The group spread out at once into the marked-off area, and they commenced to pick up loose rocks, placing them in bags, which they had strapped to their space suits.

Orloff said, "Doctors Bromark and Hamid. You will search for air and signs of life."

Sigrid took hold of Hamid's arm. "Where do you think we should look?" she asked him.

"Over there," he said. He pointed to a spot where a small mountain rose from the canyon floor near the rim of the crater.

They moved off, away from the group toward the mountain.

"I don't understand what makes me feel so strongly this way," explained Hamid. "But I can't help but think that if there is any air on the moon—or any plants—or any signs of life at all, that we'll find it somewhere over in that area of the crater."

"That's strange," said Sigrid. "Because I have the same conviction."

They moved toward the mountain almost as if drawn to it by some unknown force. It didn't take them long to reach it, and they were still in sight of the space ship, which in the grey light looked somewhat like a distant church steeple.

Selim carried in one hand a small bladder-like air detector. They paused momentarily, together, listening to something.

"I'd swear," said Selim. "That I heard someone behind us!"

"Like somebody breathing," asked Sigrid.

They looked behind them again, and all around.

"Wait. Hold your breath," said Hamid.

He thought he detected a gasping sound. "It couldn't be," he said. "There's no air ... no sound."

"Look!" exclaimed Sigrid excitedly. She pointed to the air detector.

It had started slowly to expand and was making a slight gasping sound.

"The instrument; it's working!" exclaimed Hamid. "That means ... *it couldn't be* ... but it means that there is air in the vicinity."

They became aware of the same thing together, a phosphorescent opening to a cave in the side of the mountain.

They stared at it, drawn to it. Selim held out his hand and Sigrid took it, feeling the strength, the electricity again, even through his glove. Together they walked towards the cave, the air detector in Selim's other hand working and gasping like a freshly caught trout, accelerating its pace with every step they took in the cave's direction.

They stood outside the immediate entrance and looked in.

"Such an odd cave," whispered Sigrid. "So very beautiful."

The light was coming from a strange phosphorescence, a mysterious silvery glow from something that was within the cave. The air detector Selim carried began working agitatedly.

Sigrid looked at Dr. Hamid questioningly. He stared straight ahead into the cave and then began to walk slowly but firmly into the cave's mouth. Sigrid followed him closely.

Inside, Selim walked up to the source of the strange light. It was a large flower, an unearthly kind of flower, glowing as if it were silver and sharp-edged, covered with glistening dew drops like precious stones.

Selim knelt beside it, and Sigrid beside him. She looked at him in wonderment. He plucked the exotic flower and gave it to her. He put down the air detector and gazed into her face.

The flower in her hand began to disintegrate, losing shape, the liquid metal trickling irresistibly through her fingers like quicksilver.

The air detector accelerated its pace. Selim picked it up and began to move deeper into the cave, with Sigrid, filled with awe, following mechanically.

"Look," said Selim, pointing.

He had noted some lichen-like moss clinging to the walls.

A moment later, Sigrid heard a trickling sound and turned. A thin stream of water trickled down one side of the cave. They looked at one another, very excited. The air detector was breathing heavily now, almost as if it were a pair of lungs.

Hamid suddenly stopped, realising that there was more than sufficient air for them to breathe. Slowly, deliberately, he took off his helmet. He began to inhale freely.

He turned slowly, meaningly, to Sigrid. Both of their figures were in a dim silhouette, lighted only by the glistening glimmer of the cave. He removed her head-piece. Their faces glistened with shining perspiration.

Firmly, gently, he pressed her to him until their lips met. After a long, tender embrace they paused, gazing deeply into each other's eyes, and kissed again.

Selim broke the silence. "We should go back now," he said softly.

Sigrid hesitated, looking beyond, on into the cave. She replied softly, but firmly. "No, there is something more."

Selim said solemnly, "We've found everything here."

"Have we?" asked Sigrid. Her voice was throaty with deep meaning.

Slowly and enthreallly, she drew him deeper into the cave. They disappeared through a gaseous veil, their figures dimming into it until there was nothing there but a white opaque cloud.

Chapter Eleven

ROD MURDOCH stuffed an unusual looking rock into a bag container that already bulged with them. "It's a good thing everything on the moon weighs only one-sixth of what it does on earth," he said.

Heinrich, too, was gathering rocks. "Including yourself, Roddy," he cautioned. "So don't overdo it."

Rochester had been crouching over something intently. Now he rose and called excitedly, "Dr. Orloff! Everybody, come here! I found something interesting."

Everybody gathered around Rochester, and now some of them started to help him pick up the rocks he had uncovered. The rock deposit was unusual, glittering, with a bright streak through it.

"Look!" exclaimed Rochester. "Dr. Orloff—what I've found here. It's gold, isn't it?"

There was a gleaming excitement in his eyes as he held up one of the rocks to Orloff.

Orloff examined it briefly.

"It's gold, da!" he admitted indifferently.

He tossed it back to Rochester, who shrugged and placed several pieces of the gold ore into his bag, clinically.

The fool, Orloff thought, to get excited over gold. As if we could load the rocket ship down with the stuff. Well, he had nipped any gold fever in the bud.

He had been looking down at the deposit, throwing rocks aside indifferently.

"Wait a minute!" he called. "There's something really unusual under there. Get those rocks aside. Let me see what that is down beneath."

Rod and Heinrich hurried up to help uncover the rocks of gold. Rochester pitched in. Their hands uncovered rocks until the rock Orloff had seen lay in the open. It was a crystal-like rock with an unearthly glow.

"My God," said Rod. "It's a big opal."

"No, it's not that," said Heinrich.

"Wait a minute," said Rochester. "I'll get something to pry it out with."

"No, no," came Orloff's voice. "Careful. Don't damage it."

Their hands worked to throw away rocks and pumice dust until their faces were beaded with sweat. Vargas and Makonnen hurried up,

dumped their bags on the ground and lent their muscle power. Finally the rock was completely uncovered to view. They heaved on it and it tilted abruptly.

“Be careful now!” Orloff cried. “Careful, you fools!”

The rock was lifted out of the moon-earth carefully and brought to Orloff. He seized upon it caressingly, and they clustered around him as he examined it. It was roughly the size of a space helmet, and it glowed like a fire opal.

“What is it, Dr. Orloff?” asked Rod.

Heinrich exclaimed, “I’ve never seen anything like it!”

“Nor have I!” said Orloff. “We are the first to lay eyes upon a stone like this. It’s like fire! Molten fire!”

The rock glistened in his hands, shot through with veins of many coloured lights imprisoned within it.

Makonnen reached out and gingerly touched it. “It’s beautiful,” he said in awe. “But evil. Evil and sharp like the jewel of Medea!”

“Da, da!” agreed Orloff excitedly. “An excellent name for it! The Medea stone! *I* have named it.”

Makonnen suddenly straightened. He took a few steps back from the group and stood very still, almost as though he were listening for something.

Vargas turned from the group and looked at Makonnen. “What is it, Asmara? Surely you’re not listening for something?”

Makonnen shook his head slowly, but continued to stand with his head lifted, his sensitive face listening.

“I feel something,” he said finally. “There’s something not quite right.”

Several members of the expedition began the tedious task of loading the precious rocks and pieces of ore into the rocket ship.

Orloff had decided to handle his Medea Stone himself. He climbed up the ladder and handed it tenderly to David Ruskin.

“Take care, Ruskin,” he cautioned. “Handle it as you would a child. It seems harder than a diamond, but even the best diamond can be chipped.”

Anderson came hurrying up the ladder behind Orloff. He caught sight of the stone and gave a low whistle. “They told me what you’d found,” he said, “but you have to see it to believe it.”

“Captain Anderson,” Orloff demanded, “I want to search deeper. There may be more precious stones like this Medea Stone. Let’s have the explosion now, please!”

“Yes,” Anderson agreed. He looked quickly at his wrist watch. “But we must hurry. We’ve got only about another hour of oxygen supply left.”

“At once, then!” said Orloff.

A few minutes later, most of the crew had gathered around Vargas and the streamlined, mortar-like device that he had set up.

He glanced questioningly at Anderson who gave a little nod of his head.

“Stand back,” Vargas cautioned the group.

He pressed a button, the weapon recoiled and a bazooka-like atomic projectile shot out of its muzzle. It zoomed up, arching lazily, and dropped down into one of the smaller craters.

There was a second of waiting; then, without any sound, a vast explosion. They could feel vibrations from it through the soles of their feet. Boulders were hurled high in the air. Liquid metal-like lava bubbled up noiselessly, and spilled over the jagged rim of the crater.

The bright, molten metal started to run in crazy, meandering little streams down the crater’s side, like crawling serpents, endless and radiant.

The crew stood frozen, hypnotized by the sight, overcome with awe. Hideko remembered her camera and began taking pictures.

Orloff was the first to speak. “What is it?” he asked. He became wild with curious delight. “That molten metal. What is it?”

Unexpectedly, he sprang forward, breaking into a loping run toward the crater. The others stood watching him.

Heinrich frowned in deep thought, then his eyes lighted up in realisation. He pounded a heavy fist into his hand. “The mystery of the white rays of the Moon. It could be ... it just could be ...”

Rochester saw what he was driving at. “By jove, yes,” he exclaimed. “It is. Silver!”

“Silver,” whispered Makonnen. “It doesn’t seem quite possible.”

“That’s what it is,” said Anderson. “It would explain those long silvery rays stretching out from Tycho, Copernicus, and Kepler.”

“Imprisoned for centuries in the fissures of the Moon,” said Rochester. “Just think of it.”

Heinrich suddenly realised, looking after Orloff, the danger he was facing.

“*Mein Gott!*” he screamed. “That crazy Russian! Stop him. If that’s silver, don’t let him touch it!” He began to run.

They all ran forward in alarm. Anderson sprinted into the lead, with Makonnen and Vargas close behind him, but he could see that he

wouldn't reach Orloff in time. He shouted a warning, but realised he couldn't be heard this far away. The suit radios carried only a short distance.

Orloff was aware of the crew running behind him now, but he paid them no heed. He ran up to a thick stream of the silver, and excitedly, without thinking, he plunged his hands into the liquid metal to scoop it up and put it in his bag.

The gloves covering the fingers of his space suit immediately smoked and disintegrated into ash, the silver running off.

Orloff screamed. He clasped his burned hands and screamed out his agony until he was gasping for breath.

Anderson was the first to reach him and at once saw the serious danger he was in. The sleeves of his space suit had burned away. His oxygen was escaping.

Orloff managed another choked scream, his eyes round, his face contorted with pain. He could not stand still in his agony. He wanted to run, thrash, writhe. Anderson held him. He made little gasping sounds, his face beginning to purple.

"Hideko, quickly!" Anderson called. "Your emergency space suit seal!"

She ran up, nodding, sizing up the situation immediately, and reached for her first-aid kit at her waist. Quickly she and Vargas spread on the sealing liquid, which acted like instant glue, repairing Orloff's sleeves so that the oxygen could not escape.

Orloff began to breathe a little better, but his hands were causing him great agony as they began to freeze in the frigid cold.

Anderson turned to Makonnen. "Asmara—if you'll see that Orloff gets back to the space-ship. Somebody must stay with him there."

"I'll stay," offered Hideko.

Orloff found his voice. "What a fool I was!" he moaned. "I should have known. I didn't think. I didn't think! I deserve this. Damn me for a stupid, unthinking fool!"

"Quiet," said Vargas. "Conserve your energy."

Makonnen and Vargas, supporting him between them, helped Orloff toward the *Lunar Eagle 1* with Hideko trudging along behind them.

Rochester, concerned, came up to Anderson. "Captain," he said. "I've just become aware of something. Sigrid and Selim—they're not with us! They're missing!"

"Oh my God," said Anderson, grave concern written across his face. He glanced at his watch. "We'll have to search. But let's be quick. There's not much time!"

Chapter Twelve

THE crew, with their cold lights, swarmed into the cave in search for Sigrid and Selim. Both Vargas and Makonnen had noticed them head out in this direction, and Makonnen seemed to have an uncanny ability to read their track, even on long stretches of hard rock. There had been no doubt in his mind but what they had entered the cave.

The cold lamps threw banners of an eerie light through the darkness. Anderson noticed the faintest trace of a phosphorescent glow to the walls of the cave. He also noticed that Makonnen was visibly nervous, and stood listening a lot, a sure sign that things were not right.

“Selim! Sigrid!” called Vargas. Others joined in shouting until their desperate cries echoed ghost-like from the walls.

Makonnen turned and stared at Anderson. “Did you hear that?” he asked.

Anderson gave a little shake of his head, puzzled.

“Echoes. Don’t you see, John? It shows there’s air in here.”

Before Anderson could reply, he stumbled over something, and they flashed cold lamps on it. It was Sigrid’s discarded head piece. Makonnen stooped and picked up Selim’s. In the eerie light of the cave they looked at one another apprehensively.

“Captain Anderson!” Rod called from a few feet away.

They hurried over to where Rod was kneeling on the ground. Their lights shone on a solid wall of ice. There was pumice dust here and their footprints were outlined plainly, heading straight for the ice.

Makonnen held his light low. He gave a little gasp. “Look!”

A half print showed where the wall severed it.

Anxious faces crowded in for a close look. “How could that possibly be?” Rochester asked in awe. Vargas crossed himself.

Makonnen rose to his full height, and took out a strong pick from his waistband. With all his strength he swung the sharp point of the heavy pick into the ice. There was a dull sound of impact, and the pick cracked off, useless.

“My God,” Rod choked.

Makonnen shrugged that it was useless. Anderson nodded gravely, and they turned dispiritedly to leave the cave.

Rochester was last to leave. He kept looking back, not wanting to believe they had given up so soon, yet realising the hopelessness of it

all. Oxygen was running low, and it wasn't as though they could look deeper into the cave, or had some side tunnels to investigate. It was all so simple, so spelled out for them. The two of them had somehow walked through that curtain of ice. They, the search party, could not get through, and that was that. Yet, in some way, Rochester hoped for a miracle. A last minute call for help, perhaps.

He realised he had dropped quite a way behind the other members of the party, and had wandered off to the right of their path. He took a hurried step and found himself in a small, deep pit of pumice dust, sinking in at once to his knees. He looked down, frightened, tried to step out and found to his horror that he could not. He struggled frantically but was unable to extricate himself, and was in fact, sinking deeper, sucked down by the layers of heavier dust underneath.

Panicky, he yelled into his suit radio, "Help! Somebody, help!"

Rod and Makonnen were in the rear of the group hurrying back to the rocket ship. They turned, saw what had happened, and shouted a warning to the others as they broke into a run.

By the time Rod and Makonnen reached Rochester, he had sunk almost to his hips in the pit of pumice dust and was struggling hopelessly.

Rod ran first and grabbed him by one outstretched hand.

"Don't struggle!" yelled Makonnen. "It'll only pull you deeper. It's like quicksand."

He brushed Rod aside and grabbed the sinking man by both hands. With all his great strength he tried to pull him out. His muscles bulged and quivered, his face contorted with the effort, but it was useless; he couldn't budge him a fraction of an inch.

Rod dropped to his hands and knees at the pit's edge and tried to push the dust aside, but it was hopeless, and it was only with a great effort that he was able to extricate his own hands.

Makonnen still continued to pull on Rochester's hand, but the Englishman had already sunk to his hips in spite of the Negro's efforts.

"You can't save me," said Rochester, his voice almost calm. "Don't let yourself get caught."

Anderson and Vargas came running up, and combined their strength with Makonnen's, but it was clearly hopeless. Rochester had sunk in to his chest by now.

"It's no good," he cried. "I'm gone."

He was sinking rapidly and was down to his shoulders. Makonnen still clung to his hands while Anderson ran around in back of him to help extricate him.

Rochester was to his chin as Anderson frantically tried again.

Suddenly his head went under. Makonnen still hung on his outstretched hands, but the arms were being sucked down after the body. Regretfully, sobbing silently to himself, Makonnen freed his hold of the hands and they slowly disappeared beneath the pumice dust.

It was at that moment that Anderson realised that he, too, was sinking into the pumice.

“Rod! Rod!” he called.

Rod looked back at him horror-stricken. He got to his feet, took a step toward Anderson, then turned and ran in the opposite direction.

“Rod!” Makonnen screamed. “Come back. Don’t panic on us. Don’t panic!” He hurried to Anderson’s side and grabbed his hands.

Vargas said, “I know what that boy is up to. Why, oh God, didn’t I think of it sooner?”

Rod came running back carrying a magnet buoy. He shoved it against the back-strapped metal kit Anderson wore and although the strain on that suit was apparent, it stopped him from sinking any more. Rod and Vargas held on to the buoy firmly. Slowly the magnetic force pulled Anderson a little higher. Makonnen rushed to the other side of the pit to get a better grip of him.

Heinrich and Hideko came hurrying up and there was shock on their faces.

It took still a few more painful, terrifying seconds to extricate Anderson completely from the pit with the aid of the magnet.

“Where is Rochester?” asked Hideko.

Makonnen jerked his thumb downward, his face grim. Hideko realized what he meant and sucked in her breath. This was like a nightmare. She had wanted to come back out of the ship when she saw them returning, thinking perhaps she might be needed for first aid. Heinrich had waited for her and told her the terrible story about Selim and Sigrid. And now Rochester. It was almost too much. She wanted to scream.

Anderson was safe. He collapsed for a moment, to his knees, his head hung down, as he fought to regain his breath. He looked at his watch, and then up to Makonnen and Vargas who assisted him to his feet.

He stood breathing hard with exertion. “Quick! We’ve got to be quick! Time is running out. It’s only a matter of minutes before our oxygen goes.”

They nodded and started off toward the *Lunar Eagle*, helping him.

Rod began to weep softly. “Oh Lord,” he sobbed, “why didn’t I think of the magnet buoy in time to save Bill? Oh why ... why ...”

“Thank the good Lord you thought of it in time for Anderson,” said Makonnen. “None of the rest of us did. Poor Bill. He’d be alive now if we’d had our wits about us.”

In the cold earthlight the group, what was left of it now, limped back toward the rocket ship.

Chapter Thirteen

INSIDE the *Lunar Eagle 1*, on B-Deck, David Ruskin examined the reading for the outside temperature. Most of the crew had gathered there, and Orloff lay on a bunk looking at his bandaged hands.

“Lost—lost—” he bemoaned, holding his hands before him. “What a fool! What a foolish waste!”

Ruskin remarked, “Believe it or not, outside it’s two hundred and two degree below zero. You people returned just in time.”

“And we’re only in the beginning of the lunar night,” Heinrich added.

Rod said wisely, “Night here, like day, is the equivalent of fifteen days and nights upon earth.”

“That’s right,” agreed Heinrich, “And it’ll drop to at least two hundred and fifty below zero. Just think of that.”

“At that,” laughed Rod, “I’d rather be here now than at the peak of the lunar day when it’s hotter than boiling water outside.”

With no physician now on board, Hideko had taken over these duties and was busy giving everyone their physical checkups. She moved to Heinrich with her medical instruments, carefully rolled up his sleeve and took his blood pressure. She looked at the reading of his blood count and hid her alarm, but could not help glancing warningly at Ruskin. Heinrich caught their exchange of looks.

“My blood pressure’s up, isn’t it? Ironical, because I never felt better than when I was on the Moon—before all our misfortunes befell.”

“You must remain very quiet, Dr. Heinrich,” Ruskin advised. “Rest. Don’t let anything more upset you.”

Anderson’s voice came over the intercom just then, sounding a little strained. They all paused to listen.

“Captain Anderson to entire personnel ... Please come up to A-Deck at once.”

They looked at one another questioningly.

“Wonder what that means?” asked Rod. “More trouble for us?”

Hideko gave a little sigh. “Well, Roddy, there’s one way to find out.” She headed for the ladder.

Anderson sat in his captain’s chair facing the remaining nine members of the group. When he spoke, his voice was forcedly calm and matter-of-fact.

“All contact with Earth has been broken off,” he announced. “No

television, or radio. Nothing but static. We are in complete isolation.”

Martel stepped over to the magnetic tape receiver and examined it briefly. “The tape receiver seems to be working perfectly,” he said. Then as though to explain to those who might not understand, he added, “You know, the message will come over this when it’s even too weak for the radio.”

Anderson said flatly, “I’ve checked the magnetic tape, Martel. It does work perfectly. It’s just that we’re getting no messages.”

“Try to establish contact again, John,” suggested Vargas.

Anderson nodded and spoke into the microphone.

“*Lunar Eagle 1* on the Moon to Earth Control. Come in. Earth Control.”

There was a long pause while nine pairs of eyes watched the magnetic tape receiver. The tape continued to revolve perfectly, but was completely blank.

“I don’t understand it,” said Heinrich. “We got through to each other a few hours ago with no trouble at all.”

Anderson picked up the microphone again. “Come in, Earth Control. Our magnetic tape receiver on *Lunar Eagle 1* is working. Do you hear us, Earth Control?”

They all watched the tape receiver. Now, suddenly, something began to appear on the receiving tape. Ruskin leaped forward excitedly.

“Look!”

On the turning blank tape, strange designs now began to appear. They were like odd-looking symbols.

“It is something,” said Heinrich. “Reduce tape speed.”

“Check,” said Vargas. He made an adjustment on the back of the machine. The procession of strange symbols was now slowed down.

They all pushed forward intent on seeing the magnetic tape. They began to comment almost simultaneously.

“What is it?” asked Ruskin.

“It looks like hieroglyphics!” said Orloff.

Makonnen said decidedly. “It’s nothing Egyptian—no part African!”

Vargas scratched his jaw. “It’s like Oriental picture-writings.”

“Could it be Chinese?” asked Martel.

Hideko suddenly gasped. “Oh, no, it couldn’t be,” she whispered. “It’s incredible. Unbelievable!”

“Do you recognise it, Hideko?” Anderson asked. “Is it something you understand?”

Hideko continued to stare at the tape as though she didn’t hear

Anderson. She was awed, completely fascinated by what she saw.

"No, it can't be!" she exclaimed. "It's—it's just impossible!"

Anderson was excited. "You know what it is? Can you translate it for us, Hideko?"

"I don't know," said Hideko. "It's so fantastic. Like an ancient Chinese dialect ..."

Anderson held her gently by the arms. "But you understand it?" he persisted. "You can translate it?"

Hideko took a deep breath and said a little shakily, "I'll try."

Those closer to the magnetic tape drew apart, and she came up close, with Anderson, to where she could better read the slowly moving tape, with its succession of symbols appearing on it.

She began to translate, slowly, haltingly. "I speak for the Great Coordinator of the Moon. We advise and warn you—" She gave a little gasp. When Anderson nodded to her encouragingly, she continued.

"Return to your Earth at once! You have done enough damage."

She paused again, moistening her lips, and glancing up at Anderson. He nodded grimly, his eyes glued upon the tape. "Go on," he urged. "There's more, isn't there?"

She nodded and studied the tape. "You have been bombarding us for years, incessantly," she translated. "Our equilibrium has been shaken. Leave us in peace."

Heinrich had shoved himself as near forward as possible and was listening intently, beads of perspiration standing out on his furrowed brow.

"But how do they live?" he asked. "Where?"

The tape continued to turn slowly, new symbols appearing on it.

Hideko translated: "We read your mind. We know your every thought. We cannot speak as you do. We communicate by waves of thought."

The crew members listened spellbound. Rod was completely fascinated. Martel's jaw hung slack in utter amazement. Ruskin shook his head in disbelief.

Hideko moved a little closer and continued haltingly. "We live in a great sealed city below, where there is a vast storage of oxygen. We are not enslaved by your earthly emotions—greed—lust and passions of conquest. You bring the seeds of greed and destruction. We could not allow you to stay among us, for you would only contaminate our perfect form of harmony."

Anderson said concernedly, "Sigrid—Selim—is their fate known?"

The tape continued to revolve slowly, with a new set of symbols

appearing.

Hideko read aloud: "They have suffered no harm. They have joined us—no harm shall befall them."

Hideko hesitated, and as more symbols appeared, she continued to translate. "They say they are in love. We are studying this curious emotion, which is unknown to us. If we find love turns to evil, possessiveness and hatred, as we believe, we will destroy these lovers, you, and many of your kind. We want to immobilise you completely.

"Already, you doubt, and you fear. Soon you will turn upon each other. There is nothing hidden among us. There is no crime. Remember—we have the power to immobilise you at will."

Hideko turned and said in a more normal voice, "That's all. The symbols have stopped coming."

Ruskin's face contorted with disbelief.

"I don't believe this!" he shouted. "It's impossible! Don't you all see? We're being fooled. This is a hoax!"

Anderson looked up commandingly, speaking sharply. "Ruskin, be quiet!"

Ruskin started to say something, then clenched his lips, forcing himself to stay quiet. He glanced at the now blank tape receiver, hesitating, the fury building up within him.

He sprang forward, his face purple. "Do you actually believe this, Captain? Any of you? Those symbols must have been sent by a power already secretly here upon the moon! A power that wishes to scare us away!"

He turned directly to Orloff. They all stared at the Russian.

"You!" the Israelite accused.

Orloff scowled at him. "We do not stoop to such childish horseplay!"

Ruskin shook a finger at him. "Or it must be—sabotage!"

Orloff scoffed. "Science has always come first and last with me!"

Turning to the others, Ruskin said, "That Russian devil and the Japanese woman are in league. They have concocted this hoax to frighten us."

Anderson took an angry step forward. "Shut up, Ruskin!"

Ruskin glared at him. "Can't you see through this? Am I the only one to think it odd the coincidence of this Japanese woman reading those symbols?"

"The symbols are in a Chinese dialect," flared up Hideko.

"And you are Japanese," said Ruskin.

"My mother was Chinese," said Hideko. "Everybody knows I am

half Chinese. It has been no secret.”

“And the coincidence of Chinese being used on the Moon,” said Ruskin. “Has anybody anything to say about that?”

“Ruskin,” said Anderson, “I told you to shut up. That’s an order.”

“I will not shut up!” Ruskin shouted. “I will be heard!”

“You crazy, headstrong Polonsky!” cried Orloff. He burst into Russian, then said, “I scarcely know Dr. Murata. She and I met for the first time only a few minutes before take-off. How dare you accuse us of being in league?”

“You Russians have made our Poland suffer as did the Nazis,” said Ruskin between his teeth.

He looked around at the crew members. The group was speechless.

“It’s a plot! A damned plot of the Russians!”

Anderson strode forward, seized Ruskin by the shoulders and shook him. He was fiercely angry “What’s got into you, Ruskin?” he asked, his eyes blazing.

“Knock me down, then!” shouted Ruskin. “Strike me! I *will* be heard.”

Martel had been watching cynically, as if he were a spectator on life.

“Ah, it begins,” he remarked. “*Les bêtes humaines.*”

Heinrich stepped forward with the intention of putting a fatherly arm on Ruskin’s shoulder. All this anger and play of emotions was beginning to bother him. He felt ill.

Ruskin started to head for Orloff, but Anderson restrained him.

“Take your hands off me!” Ruskin spat.

Anderson was tempted to strike him, but controlled himself, and instead threw him back contemptuously. Ruskin sprawled upon the floor.

Heinrich said in a choked up voice, “Control yourself ...!” He swayed, his face a mass of perspiration. He tried to steady himself.

Hideko saw him and hurried over to grab him, calling out, “Doctor Heinrich! Look to Doctor Heinrich!”

Vargas leaped to Heinrich’s side and he and Anderson saved him from falling. They escorted Heinrich to a bunk.

Anderson turned to the others authoritatively. “Go below, please. Doctor Heinrich has suffered from a stroke.”

Stunned by the swift change of events, the crew moved to obey, filing down the ladder to the decks below. Only Anderson, Hideko and Vargas remained with Heinrich, but Ruskin lingered behind at the ladder-well, looking back at Heinrich struggling for breath.

Hideko gave the afflicted man an injection. "He will rest and sleep now. He must have absolute quiet."

"Is it bad?" asked Anderson.

Hideko shook her head in doubt. "He's exhausted. He's upset. Who can say?"

From the ladder-well Ruskin asked in a strained voice, "Is there something I can do here?"

"Not now," said Anderson. "Thank you, Ruskin."

Ruskin turned to the ladder, but at this moment Heinrich started to speak in a tone of self-torment. "Why did you do it, father? Why? How can I ever live down your heinous crime?"

Ruskin paused, staring at Heinrich, his face screwed up in puzzlement.

Heinrich was slipping into unconsciousness, but his voice, the voice of his conscience, was speaking. It had been locked up inside him for a long time, for many years. Now the wall Heinrich had built around it had weakened and broken and it was all surging out.

"I am ashamed," moaned Heinrich. He twisted and struggled. "I cannot bear your name, father. I'll take my mother's name. I cannot be Eric Bernhauer. I will be Eric Heinrich." He began to react to the hated name with a fierce intensity.

Ruskin could hardly believe his ears. He did not move from the ladder-well. He stared at the inert figure on the bunk, the man who had begun to seem almost like a father to him. "What is he saying?" he asked. "What does he mean?"

The sedative was beginning to have its effect on Doctor Heinrich now. He was slipping into a troubled, drugged sleep.

"I am no longer Eric Bernhauer ..." he muttered. "I am Eric Heinrich ... Eric Hein ..." His voice blurred and drifted away.

Ruskin took half a dozen steps towards Heinrich, completely stunned. Anderson and Hideko, seeing his face, went to him, restraining him.

Ruskin's dark eyes had grown round, his face ashen. "Did you hear what he just said? His real name's not Heinrich—it's Bernhauer! *Bernhauer!* He is the son of the man who killed thousands of my people! My own parents! My brother and sisters!"

Anderson said, "Doctor Ruskin; you mustn't! Control yourself! Eric wasn't responsible for that. Couldn't you see how he felt about it?"

"David, please!" said Hideko.

Ruskin broke down and began to sob as though his insides would tear out. His knees went weak. Anderson grabbed hold of him and held him up.

“To think ... the son of a man who ...”

“I’m sorry, Ruskin,” said Anderson softly. “Go below with the others, please.”

Ruskin stumbled to the ladder, then turned. “I hope he dies,” he said, his voice husky with hate. “May he rot in hell!”

Chapter Fourteen

THE rocket ship was poised, ready to take off, some of its machinery already beginning its low hum. Makonnen sat at his navigator's post checking out his instruments. He was bending over the radarscope when he got the distinct impression of a shadow over him. Quickly he looked up, saw nothing, He felt cold. He shivered. Rising to his feet, he stood as though listening for a long moment then moved over to the ladder and climbed to A-Deck.

Anderson was at his control board going over a set of figures. He looked up when Makonnen came over.

"John," said the stargazer in a low voice, "the Moon People—they're hanging around our ship."

"Have you seen them, Asmara?" asked Anderson.

"No," admitted Makonnen, "but I can feel them."

"To tell you the truth," said Anderson, "I've imagined that I sensed their presence too." He shrugged. "Perhaps it's just nerves."

"No," said Makonnen simply. "I've felt them."

The magnetic tape began to run a few inches, blankly, and then once more the strange symbols returned.

"Hideko!" called Anderson. "Come quickly."

She came, followed by Vargas and Ruskin.

Anderson pointed with a pencil to the magnetic tape receiver. "Translate, please, Hideko." He noticed that the entire crew, except for Heinrich, had gathered behind her.

Hideko frowned over the tape and read slowly, "Strangers from Earth ... before you depart, we must have one thing ... you will leave behind the two cats."

"No!" cried Rod. "Not the cats."

Some of those present turned and looked at the cats perched behind them. Mimi and Rodolpho were standing up to alert attention, their eyes wide open.

"Cats," Hideko translated, "have a most unusual appeal to us, but unfortunately we have none here on the Moon. They interest us nearly as much as the two who joined us."

Ruskin rubbed his head in complete disbelief. "This is absolutely insane!" he declared.

"Quiet, please," said Anderson. "Go on, Hideko."

"That's all. It's stopped."

Anderson nodded. "Turn it off, Vargas."

Etienne Martel shook his head with a cynical smile. "*Fou—tout le monde est fou. Moi—moi, seulement—I alone am not crazy.*"

Ruskin was nonplussed, but his face lighted up with an idea. "Perhaps we shouldn't leave them the cats," he suggested. "Through them they might have read our thoughts. Could they, in some occult hocus-pocus, have been reading the minds of the cats?"

"Oh-ho!" laughed Orloff. "So it was neither the Russian nor the Japanese who was at fault! It was the pussy-cats. *Vospedei boishav moy!*"

Ruskin was unhappy. "Well, it could be. I don't know what to think now. I'm all mixed up."

Orloff made a sarcastic gesture with his bandaged hands. "So at last I am cleared. I won't have to go to Siberia after all."

"Ridiculous!" exclaimed Ruskin. "To open those doors again for two cats! Who's going?"

"I will," said Anderson. He put a hand on Rod's shoulder. "Come with me, Rod."

"Do we have to?" asked Rod. "I've grown fond of Mimi and Rodolpho."

"Yes, we have to," said Anderson.

"Okay then. Let's go." He went to the cats' transparent cages, poured milk into their containers, then attached oxygen tanks into their cages. The cats began calmly to lap up milk as Rod took the cages down from their perch.

In their space suits, Rod and Captain Anderson climbed down the ladder from the airlock and stood in the pumice dust looking around.

"There's a flat topped rock over there," said Anderson pointing to a spot a short distance away.

"I was hoping," said Rod through his suit radio, "that they would meet us in person, and we could get a good look at them."

"No chance of that," said Anderson, "and perhaps it is just as well. Come on."

They left the cats in their cages on the rock and started back for the rocket ship.

Something prompted Rod to look back when they were almost at the ship. His eyes widened and he grabbed at Anderson's sleeve.

In the grey light of the lunar night, with only a little earth-light to see by, they saw a heavy shadow approaching the flat-topped rock. For a few seconds it completely shrouded it. Extending from the shroud they thought they saw another indistinct shadow, resembling

an elongated human being. For just an instant the two men squinted at it, trying to further distinguish its shape, then it mingled with the opaque, moving shadow. A cloud of smoke seemed to pass over the rock and when it cleared the cat cages had disappeared, leaving only the barren rock.

Rod and Anderson hurried back into the ship, the ladder was pulled up, the airlock closed.

By the time Rod was out of his space suit he began to shake.

"We saw them," he told Vargas. "Some kind of screwy humanoids. Monsters, if you ask me." He shuddered. "I'm glad after all that we didn't meet them face to face."

"It was dark," said Anderson. "We saw a couple of shadows. Whatever they were, they took the cats. But what they looked like, I'm afraid neither of us can truthfully say." He turned to Rod. "It was dark and our imaginations were working overtime."

"I saw them," Rod insisted. To Makonnen, who had just come up to A-Deck, he said. "They were humanoids eight feet tall!"

Anderson gave him a slap on the thigh. "Get below to your bunk, story teller. We're taking off." He headed for the control board.

The *Lunar Eagle* stood ready for take-off. Suddenly, noiselessly, the ignition flared at the base of the ship, and it rose quickly, easily, above the surface of the Moon.

Several hours passed as they sped through empty space towards Earth.

On A-Deck Anderson picked up the intercom mike and announced: "Three hours and ten minutes in flight—we're right on the button. We've just passed the neutral line."

Hideko had turned slightly to listen to the announcement over the intercom speaker. Now something had caught the corner of her eye. She whirled around and a look of terror crossed her face. She screamed and pointed.

Alarmed, Anderson jumped up. Already he smelled scorch, felt heat.

"The Medea Stone!" Orloff screamed.

Vargas turned around in his chair.

The Medea Stone, arranged against the gold nuggets, was glowing with a white heat, now that the two stones had been placed together in an oxygen-filled room. The metal wall was already badly scorched, and it seemed only a matter of minutes before it might be burned completely through.

Vargas sprang to his feet, grabbed Ruskin, who stood frozen, staring at the stone, and shoved him down into the pilot's seat.

"Take over!" he ordered.

He sprang forward, grabbed a fire-extinguisher with a foam content, and quickly covered the white-hot stones with foam. He pushed the fire-extinguisher into Anderson's hands and ran across the cabin to seize an asbestos coat which had gloves so that his hands would be protected. He sprinted back and grabbed the foam-covered sizzling hot stones.

Anderson had quickly guessed the plan in Vargas's mind. Carrying the fire-extinguisher, he rushed to the airlock door and threw it open. Vargas heaved the glowing, foam-covered rock into the airlock and immediately Anderson covered the rock with another layer of thick foam. He slammed the airlock door shut and leaned against it, looking at Vargas in admiration.

"It can't burn now in there," Anderson said. "No oxygen." He patted Vargas's shoulder. "Quick thinking, Luis!"

Vargas nodded, a little out of breath and for the first time feeling pain in his hands. Anderson shot him a twisted smile of commendation, gave a little whistle of relief, and went back to his chair.

Orloff stood shaking his head resignedly at the air-lock door. "It was well-named the Medea Stone," he told Vargas. "Oxygen fused it into fire, when it touched the gold."

Vargas removed his asbestos coat, and examined his blistered hands. Hideko came up to him, took his big hands in her small ones and looked at them, concern written all over her oval face.

He smiled at her. "They're not bad. Really, it's nothing."

"Let me fix them for you," said Hideko. She opened her first-aid kit and took some salve out, rubbing it in the palms of his hands so carefully he could scarcely feel anything but the soft, cool caress of her fingers.

How very kind this woman is, thought Vargas. How gentle and kind. He watched her, his eyes soft with appreciation.

Anderson was back at the radio control. He said into the microphone, "*Lunar Eagle 1* to Earth Control. Come in, Earth Control."

Almost to his surprise, the answer came back immediately over the speaker, loud and clear.

"Earth Control to *Lunar Eagle 1*. We hear you. We hear you, *Lunar Eagle 1*. We've been waiting. We lost all contact, but we have your position now. Why did you leave the Moon?"

"We had an urgent departure," replied Anderson. "Give us our position."

"Your position at this moment is ..."

The voice of the Earth Control began to fade, and then drifted off.

Quickly Anderson checked the magnetic tape receiver. It revolved slowly, but nothing appeared on the tape.

Loudly into the mike he said, "I've lost you, Earth Control. Come in." He paused, and repeated, "Come in, Earth Control."

There was no answer.

Chapter Fifteen

HIDEKO had just finished binding the wounds Vargas had received when she heard the moan. They were standing near Heinrich's bunk and she turned to see that he was coming out of his drugged sleep.

Heinrich raised himself up slightly, as if he were coming out of a bad dream. There was a dazed look upon his face. Hideko went to him quickly.

"Lie down, Dr Heinrich," she told him, pressing him gently back in his bunk. "There is nothing you can do." She smiled brightly. "We're on our way back to Earth now."

"Damn," said Heinrich. "I missed it. I missed the whole damn take-off."

"It was nothing," said Hideko. "Not at all like the take-off from Earth. Now lie down, please."

Heinrich sighed ragged, and obediently lay back upon his pillow.

The moon had receded to the point where it did not show up so big and menacing, but its geography was still plainly evident to those interested. However, the bright globe that was the third planet from the sun was attracting the most attention.

Rod was looking at Earth intently through Makonnen's telescope. "Look," he said. "There's Europe. You can just make it out. There's a storm over England. And see how the sun glistens on the polar cap." He pulled away so that Makonnen could take a quick look.

"It's still a long distance away," said Makonnen gravely, "with many dangers between here and there."

"I feel as though I'd been away a hundred years," said Rod. "When I get back to Kansas I'm just going to sit in the swing in the back yard for at least a week." He smiled at the thought. "I'm going to soak up the sun and be glad I live on Earth and not some place like the moon."

"I always miss the birds singing," said Makonnen, "and I ache to see the old blue sky again. It's little things like that. We're children of the earth and we're not meant to live any place else." He gave a little smile and a tilt of his head. "Yet if we get back, I know in my heart that I'll go out again the first opportunity I get. It gets in your blood."

"You say 'if'. Do you think that we won't make it back, Asmara?"

"I don't know," replied Makonnen. "Earth seems so remote right now. I haven't been able to shake off this terrible feeling since we left the moon. As though their evil force was right here with us."

“Those humanoids on the moon? Bosh! We’re way beyond their control.” Rod turned and headed for the ladder to A-Deck. “Guess I’ll see what’s going on upstairs.”

Anderson was sitting in his chair tapping a pencil thoughtfully when Rod came up the ladder. He had given up trying to contact Earth. He looked at Vargas and Hideko in grim puzzlement.

“I don’t understand it,” he said. “We’ve lost Earth contact completely.”

Hideko looked frightened. “What the people on the moon said—they have the power to immobilize us on Earth at will.”

“Don’t say that!” snapped Anderson.

“That’s the way Makonnen’s talking,” said Rod. “It’s a lot of bunk.”

“But *they* said it,” declared Vargas, defending Hideko. “It could be true.”

Hideko looked at him gratefully. “I wonder if Sigrid and Selim are still alive? What could they do to them? It’s so fantastic and unbelievable ... and I had a feeling that they were so in love with each other.”

“I can’t imagine what had happened to them,” said Vargas.

Rod remarked, “I sure do miss Bill. He was such a swell guy.”

The intercom speaker hummed just then and Makonnen’s voice came through quick and excited. “Navigator to Captain ... I’ve picked up something on the radarscope.”

Anderson swung round to his own radar screen, but before he could size up the situation, Makonnen’s voice was back on the intercom, sounding very tense, and a little too loud.

“Meteor clusters directly ahead. Point three, zero minus xc.”

“Check,” said Anderson into the intercom mike. “I am switching to the auto-reaction pilot. Vargas, stand by for manual control.”

He pressed the button of the radar controlled autopilot, and watched the radar screen. The blips were there and the dotted line that ran from the little model rocket ship continued to run right into them. The oncoming meteors did not deflect on the instrument.

Quickly, Anderson turned to call Rod. But Rod was aware of the danger. He sat down on the nearby bunk and began to figure with pencil and a pad of paper.

Makonnen’s voice came again. “What’s happening up there? We’re running right into them!”

“Rod, hurry!” Anderson urged.

Rod was still figuring, his pencil making rapid marks on the paper as he computed the course necessary to avoid the oncoming meteors.

His brows were knitted from the strain and beads of perspiration appeared on his face.

He looked up. "Point one, zero minus xc," he told Anderson.

Anderson set a dial on his control board, flipped a switch button, and still another button. The deviation had been made.

The crew members who were on A-Deck crowded around Anderson to look at the radar-scope. The dotted line that indicated their course had swung to a new angle, away from the blips on the screen.

There was a screeching sound as the meteors zoomed past outside, and then suddenly the alarm bells began to ring.

"We've been hit!" Vargas shouted.

Anderson checked a panel of instruments. He shook his head. And as suddenly as they had started the alarm bells stopped.

"We haven't been hit," he said. "They'll go off if something comes close. The instruments show that we're completely airtight."

"This is awful, said Hideko in a trembling voice. "I'm still cringing."

The ship settled down to normal quiet; the radar panels assumed normality. Rod sat on the bunk mopping his face, relieved and pleased with himself.

Down on B-Deck, Asmara Makonnen was not relaxed. He realized from previous experience, that meteor showers often came in groups, and something inside him would not let him ease up.

Nothing showed up on the radar-scope. He turned to the radar telescope, sweeping it slowly back and forth along the course they were taking, avoiding the brightness of Earth.

Suddenly he saw them. He felt his heart give a great leap.

Two swarms of meteor clusters were hurling themselves forward directly upon the rocket ship. They were approaching from either side, and Makonnen realized that it would be only a matter of no more than half a minute before they either collided, or passed one another, directly at the point where the *Lunar Eagle* must be.

Quickly he switched on the intercom microphone. "Two swarms of meteor clusters by horizontal ten degrees," he announced, "vertical twenty-two degrees."

Anderson listened intently.

"Direct point of contact," came Makonnen's voice, "the *Lunar Eagle* 1."

Anderson turned to Rod, sitting on the bunk.

"Rod!"

But Rod was already calculating, his pencil flying.

"It's—no, wait!"

He started figuring again. They watched him nervously. Ruskin had turned on the TV screen and the camera had been aimed at the meteors. Their nearness was terrifying. On the radar-scope they showed as many blips—more than Anderson had ever seen before.

Rod wrote down some figures, and wetted his lips.

“Try ...”

“I can only try once,” Anderson warned.

“Wait!” said Rod calculating. His pencil scribbled furiously.

“Try point one, point seven and five-tenths.”

Anderson quickly turned and made the change in course. In the process his hand brushed accidentally against the master light switch. The light on A-Deck went out. They saw a meteor flash by the portholes, lighting the interior. Simultaneously, on the radar and TV panels, they watched the crash of the collision of the meteor clusters. Some whirled past one another. There was a screaming alarm in the air. A veritable fireworks of meteors was taking place on the panels.

Rod gulped noisily as he watched. Anderson found the light switch, the noise of the meteors died away, and the screens once more regained normality.

Anderson swung around and grinned at Rod. “You did better that you ever did in any TV isolation booth.”

“Please don’t bring that up,” said Rod with an embarrassed little laugh.

Hideko came over and kissed Rod on the cheek.

“Isolation booth?” asked Orloff. He paused. “I guess our invention didn’t work so good this time. The German scientists didn’t care to perfect it well enough.”

“Thank you,” said Hideko, giving Rod a big hug. “It feels so good to be alive. Thanks to you.”

Vargas came over without a word and extended a big hand. He gave Rod’s hand a vigorous, firm handshake.

Rod looked over at Heinrich on the bunk and grinned. Heinrich smiled weakly, trying to wink.

“You’re better than I ever was, Roddy. You’ve saved us all, boy.”

Rod was beginning to blush. “Well, it was my skin I wanted saved, too, you know.”

Martel walked past Orloff from where he had been standing by the porthole. He shrugged indifferently. “All this fuss because the boy just happened to come up with the right answer. Me, I’ll still put my faith in the electronic brain.”

Orloff pointed at Rod. “There will never be a substitute for a human

brain.”

Suddenly a weird whizzing noise zoomed by outside of the ship. The sound was repeated every few seconds.

“Mother of God,” said Vargas. “What’s that?”

Anderson got on the intercom. “Makonnen, do you hear that?”

“John, the hair on the back of my neck is standing straight up.”

“Vargas,” said Anderson. “Check radar.”

Whiz.

“What is it?” asked Hideko.

Makonnen cut in. “Cannot identify objects.”

“Nothing registers on radar!” said Vargas.

Whiz.

Anderson said into the intercom, “Vargas, check mechanical equipment.”

The men worked silently, swiftly. There was a look of consternation on Anderson’s face.

“All working equipment okay,” Vargas finally stated.

Whiz.

“John,” came Makonnen’s voice, “that’s coming from a source outside the hull of the ship.”

As suddenly as it had begun, the noises stopped. The men returned to their regulation tasks with sighs of relief.

The *Lunar Eagle 1* continued to head nose foreward to the enlarging globe of Earth. After several more hours the space ship turned slowly in a counter-reversal so that its nose pointed upward and away from Earth and its rocket motors pointed in the direction of *terra*.

Anderson spoke into the intercom again, this time with a contented smile upon his face. “Captain Anderson to entire personnel ... Counter-reversal accomplished. In orbit at speed matching Earth’s rotation. Altitude five hundred miles. We will stay at same point above the Earth from now on until we prepare to land.

“Operating on automatic control. Entire personnel please assemble on A-Deck.”

One by one the crew members began to file up on A-Deck from the decks below.

Anderson motioned Hideko over. “Hideko, please get the Radar and TV cameras ready to photograph Earth for us.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Luis,” said Anderson, “try radio contact once again.”

“Check,” said Vargas.

Doctor Heinrich had risen shakily to his feet. Rod hurried to his side and tried to help support him.

The scientist shook the boy off. “No, you don’t have to hold on to me! I feel fine. Let me stand on my own two feet.”

He brushed Rod aside, braced himself, and took a few steps.

“There, you see! It was only a passing thing.”

Ruskin had come up on to A-Deck. He glanced at Heinrich, his jaw tensing, and then deliberately stayed apart from him.

Makonnen came up, perplexed. “John, I feel that I must advise you ... something is wrong. Something unexplainable!”

Anderson knitted his brows. “You are right, Makonnen, I feel it too. But what is it? Everything works perfectly in the ship.”

There were more whizzing sounds outside the hull of the space ship. The two men looked at the porthole, then at each other quizzically. Anxiety was on both of their faces.

“You know, John,” said Makonnen. “I haven’t felt easy since we left the moon.”

Whiz.

“I’m cold,” said Hideko suddenly.

“I’m cold, too,” said Rod. He moved over to the wall to check the temperature gauge.

“Most unusual! Most unusual!” said Orloff.

“That’s what I wanted to tell you, John. Outside temperature reading is 245 degrees below! And still falling!”

Rod stood staring at the temperature gauge as though he did not believe the figure. He turned to Anderson.

“Gee, inside reading is 61! No wonder it’s cold in here!”

“Adjust the heat,” said Anderson.

Vargas got up from his first pilot’s chair and moved to the heater control, adjusting it. “You know, Captain, this is the first we’ve had to touch this since leaving the earth.”

A thought had crossed Makonnen’s mind like a cloud. Quickly he moved over to Vargas’ post and adjusted the electronic telescope. He squinted through it, then looked up incredulously as though he didn’t believe what he saw. He took another long look, made a delicate adjustment, then looked over at Anderson.

“Captain, quick!” he called.

Anderson rushed to his side and looked into the telescope. He rose up and rubbed his eyes, and like Makonnen, took a second long look.

When he looked up again, disbelief was stamped all over his face.

“Vargas!” he called.

Chapter Sixteen

VARGAS moved to Anderson's side and bent over to look through the telescope.

It was focused on the earth.

He saw the curvature of earth—North America. Then he gave a start. A white-bluish cloud was moving down from the north, encroaching towards the south and middle west. It had already covered Canada, was thickly covering New England, and the periphery of it was stretching out towards New York.

Vargas could scarcely believe what his startled eyes saw.

"Why this thing is moving—from the North Pole towards New York!"

Hideko had the television equipment ready. She looked inquiringly at Anderson.

"I'm getting reception, Captain Anderson."

"Good!" said Anderson.

Her deft fingers adjusted the controls. "It's a little blurred, but I think I can clear the picture."

They gathered around behind her. The TV screen was flickering.

"The electronic zoom lens is difficult to focus," explained Hideko. "Here we go."

Into focus had come a fleet of fishing boats.

"Where is that?" asked Rod.

"Cape Cod," said Hideko.

Everything seemed to be normal, but then everything began to move more slowly, until it looked like slow motion. Finally, all motion stopped completely, frozen like a still picture.

"Why don't the waves move?" asked Rod. "The boats aren't moving either."

"Must be something jammed in the TV," suggested Vargas.

Anderson was troubled. "Hideko, try some other area. Try to get New York."

She nodded and fiddled with the controls.

Coming into sharp focus was a parade down Fifth Avenue.

"Begorra," exclaimed Rod. "This is Saint Patrick's Day. Look at 'em marching!"

Even as he spoke, the action of the parade began to slow down to a

gradual standstill. All action came to a gradual stop.

Orloff shook his head. "There simply has to be something wrong with the TV."

"No, Dr. Orloff. I've checked carefully," Hideko insisted. "The machine's in perfect order."

"See what you can get with the United Nations," Anderson suggested.

Hideko nodded and switched the controls around.

The United Nations Building loomed up, blurred a little, and then Hideko had a street scene.

A group of people were gathered around a newspaper stand. The news vender had his hand in a cigar box to get change while a customer waited, paper tucked under arm, palm outstretched. A dog, frozen in motion, his tongue lolling out, was being petted by a child whose hand did not move from the head of the dog.

A man had been taking long strides across the street, holding his hat, his coat tails flapping. Now he was like a statue. A cabbie had his head out of the window, apparently to shout at the man. His mouth was open.

"Incredible!" whispered Vargas.

Anderson was frowning. His face was showing more and more deep concern.

"Hideko, see what you can get moving west to south."

"Yes, Captain."

She tried Chicago with the same results. Then she focused on New Orleans. They got in on the tail of a bit of motion.

She tried Seattle, Washington. The TV camera came into focus on Elliott Bay. In the shadow of the skyscrapers a man in a rowboat was holding up a just-caught salmon to a friend in a cabin cruiser. A freighter was pointed at a pier, tugboat by its side, its black smoke frozen in the sky. Nothing moved. A seagull was on a post, wings poised for take-up.

A ferry was taking on automobiles, none of which moved an inch.

Hideko switched to Los Angeles. The Hollywood Freeway was jammed with cars. A traffic officer was balanced on his motorcycle, obviously after a speeding motorist—who was no longer speeding.

Anderson, Vargas and Makonnen exchanged puzzled, anxious looks.

Vargas went over to Hideko.

"See what's happening in Mexico City."

She looked at him almost in tears and nodded. In a few moments she got a sharp focus on a bull ring.

The matador had just made a spectacular cape movement, the colourful crowd was like a moving sea. The bull, his sides heaving, plunged in frustrated rage beyond him. But as the bull swung around and pawed the ground to start another attack, the action began to slow. He charged in slow motion, the matador started to bring his cape up and then the action stopped. There wasn't a further movement in the entire scene.

Heinrich stepped forward, blocking the television screen. He turned to them, his expression one of rage and concern. "They did it! They did!"

"What?" asked Martel, confused.

"The Moon People," said Makonnen. His face was a mask of awe.

Hideko shut the television off. "Yes! They said they could, and they have!"

"What have they done?" asked Ruskin. "I don't understand what is happening."

"They said they had the power to immobilize us on Earth at will," replied Hideko. "And somehow they have managed to do it!"

"But how?" Ruskin asked.

Heinrich scratched his jaw pensively. "Through some development of their science, they ... whoever they are ... have found a way to freeze all molecular activity."

"Those 'whizzing' noises ..." said Rod.

"Yes," answered Heinrich. "With whatever they sent, they have extracted the heat particles out of the atmosphere and frozen it!"

"How could that be possible?" asked Rod.

"It is the reverse principle of the hydrogen bomb," explained Heinrich. "We have unsuccessfully experimented with this in Germany. We called it flash freezing."

"Yes," agreed Orloff. "Through some superior device they must have found a way to bring about a glacial phenomenon."

"Implosion bombs!" exclaimed Heinrich. "That must have been those whizzing noises."

He walked away from the group with his own thoughts. The earth, as he had known it, had come to an end. He wondered if the others had quite faced up to the situation yet.

"I somehow feel," said Ruskin, "that it is an earthly power."

Heinrich turned to face him, the picture of dejection. "All I know is that the lower atmosphere appears frozen and we must remain at this altitude above the earth so as not to be trapped in it."

Anderson had been lost in worried thought. Now he snapped to

attention.

"Vargas, establish short wave contact. Keep on trying. Condition Alert Red. Everybody to his post. On the double."

Vargas seated himself at his pilot's board and switched on the radio. He turned the radio beam to short-wave contact. Those who had no duties stood around tense and worried. Almost immediately a voice was heard from the radio speaker, talking in a foreign language.

"That's Russian, isn't it?" asked Vargas. "Come over here, Orloff."

Orloff stood at his elbow, listening, his head cocked to one side. He looked a little stunned at what he had just heard.

"... all communication between the Soviet Union and the United States has been suddenly and mysteriously broken ..." he translated.

"I knew something was up!" said Ruskin.

Martel had moved in close. "Looks like the United States is the only country involved in the big freeze," he guessed. "Try another station."

Vargas twirled the dial. He caught a word of French and brought the station back. "Here you go, Martel—your department."

Martel listened to the Parisian radio voice. "... and so the mystery deepens," he began the translation. "No one can contact any point in the United States of America, either by radio, television, or telephone ..."

Vargas groped around for another station. "Wait a second," he said. "I'm getting London."

"... Nothing like this has ever happened before. For the past ten hours, the North American Continent remains in an isolation of silence. No contact can be established by any means of communication with either Canada, the United States, or Mexico, and with the United Peace Congress itself is cut off from all contact.

"In spite of the intense cold gripping the world the governing bodies of every country are at this moment in extraordinary session, determining measures to be taken. Stand by. We will keep you informed.

"This is the BBC London."

A light background musical programme began. They all looked at one another; tremendously awed. Vargas switched off the short-wave.

"No wonder all communication's shut off," he said. "I don't think we could even come down out of our final orbit."

"Isn't it just the United States?" asked Martel.

Anderson shook his head. "I am afraid that Luis is right. We can't even come down out of our final orbit."

"But inside here, we're insulated," said Martel. "We're safe here,

aren't we?"

Anderson frowned. "Safe now, yes, but for how long? We can't stay out here for ever."

Rod had been seated at a table figuring some calculations; now he called to Heinrich.

"Please, would you look at these figures, Professor?" He held some papers to the scientist.

Heinrich took them, glancing at the figures. "What is it, Rod?"

"I was just calculating in the field of cryogenics," Rod explained. "You see, with such intense cold, the law of Earth's gravity is affected. It's gone completely haywire."

Heinrich was in a brown study for a moment, studying Rod's calculations. Then he nodded. "The boy's absolutely right. Under present conditions, it would be impossible for us to get back to Earth."

"But how long can we stay here in orbit?" Martel asked.

"I don't know," replied Anderson, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. "We're operating now under automatic control. The ship is being heated by atomic power. But the engines are overworked. It's only a matter of time before the turbines give out."

Heinrich stiffened to his full height and said decisively, "Then we must thaw the big freeze."

They stared at him as if he were superhuman; but he was calm and perfectly rational.

"Come, Rod. We have some work to do."

They withdrew to the table and were immediately involved in mathematical calculations.

Anderson, Vargas and Hideko formed a forlorn little group. Anderson scratched his chin and said abstractedly, "I should shave. But why bother?"

It broke Hideko's heart to see him this way, so dispirited; no longer a positive active figure, but just a man who needs a shave and doesn't feel like bothering. If Anderson, of all people, had given up, then what was the use of any of them holding on to any faith. Tears welled in Hideko's brown eyes.

Anderson gave a ragged sigh. "To have come this close to success, even with all our misfortune and losses—and then to fail now!"

"But we haven't failed yet, Captain Anderson," said Hideko, trying desperately to raise his spirits. "Perhaps even now ..."

"But to thaw a freeze created by a science superior to ours," he said. "It's so hopeless ..."

Vargas mustered all his inner strength to cheer his captain, for he

himself felt a tiny ray of hope. "Look here," he told Anderson, "perhaps this freeze can be thawed by a force known to us—the positive atomic versus the negative—couldn't that be? The atom bomb!"

Anderson was still disheartened. He said wearily, "It's possible, I suppose."

"Today, nothing is impossible," Hideko said firmly, "We must not lose faith, Captain Anderson."

"Hideko's right, John," insisted Vargas. "We must keep faith."

Anderson looked at them and understood what they were trying to do. He smiled at them and nodded in agreement, slapping Vargas on the shoulder.

A shout made them turn. Heinrich and Rod were standing up shaking hands with one another across the table. On both their faces was the look of excitement and hope.

"Yes, yes," cried Heinrich. "It may work. It has to work. It's the only way."

"What has to work?" Anderson wanted to know.

"The space taxi works under atomic power—right?" said Heinrich.

Anderson said, "That's right."

Heinrich made an expansive movement with his hands. "We could fashion a powerful atom bomb by assembling and uniting a number of the bomblets such as we used on the Moon. Two men, drawn by lot, could pilot the space taxi over a live volcano—Popocatepetl—the bomb could be dropped in the crater."

"I don't get it?" said Ruskin, who had been listening.

"Don't you see?" Heinrich cupped his hands. "The intense heat from the resultant explosion could thaw the freezing ray which paralyses the continent. It might not work, but we're the only ones in a position to do something. It's better than standing around with our hands in our pockets."

Anderson said, "But did you think of this: how will the space taxi crash through the frozen atmosphere?"

"Ouch," said Rod.

Heinrich paused for a long moment and considered Anderson's question.

His face lighted up with inspiration and he snapped his fingers. "The penetration rocket! As it dispersed the micro-meteoric clouds, it should conceivably break an opening for the space taxi to go in with a bomb load." His face clouded. "I admit an atomically powered space taxi could be piloted through frozen space, perhaps—but it might disintegrate. That is the risk. And that is why I say the two men will

be drawn by lot; they will probably never return to the *Lunar Eagle*.”

Vargas looked eagerly at Anderson. “It’s worth a try, isn’t it, John?”

Anderson hesitated, not wanting to be rushed into anything.

Heinrich said gravely, “It’s our only hope.”

“Very well,” said Anderson. “We’ll fashion the bomb.”

Chapter Seventeen

ON D-Deck Etienne Martel and Feodor Orloff worked on the atom bomb, Martel doing the actual physical work, and Orloff, because of his burned hands, assisting only with supervision.

“Careful now. Don’t drop it!” Orloff warned when Martel picked it up.

“There!” said Martel. “It is ready.”

“Do you want to bring the bomb up to A-Deck yourself?” Orloff asked.

“*Pourquoi pas?*”

Orloff turned and went up the ladder. Marcel had slyly been waiting for the Russian to turn his back; quickly he bent over the bomb. Quickly, effectively, he detached the fuse detonator.

Orloff was about to go up the ladder when he paused. This Frenchman had not acted right since they had left the moon. He had felt uneasy about him at times—nothing to really put a finger on, but a little different in the way he acted and talked, a little withdrawn at times ...

He turned and saw the French technician huddled briefly over the bomb. A horrible suspicion immediately stabbed at him.

He strode up to Martel. “Wait a minute!” he shouted. “What are you doing?”

Martel stood up and faced him, hugging the bomb to his chest. He shrugged expressively. “I merely finished it,” he told the Russian.

Orloff took one look and realized what Martel had done. He was furious.

“You crazy man!”

“This is our chance. Think!” cried Martel. “If the North American Continent were to remain frozen, your greatest rival would be powerless. I am one with you!”

Orloff’s face purpled. He was overcome with rage and frustration. If only he could use his hands!

“Don’t you see?” Martel persisted. “This way we control the West, and ultimately the world!”

“What do you mean—*WE?*”

Martel looked incredulous. “You are not *one of us?*”

“I am a scientist,” Orloff shouted. “I am a human being. I am not an insane murderer.”

“You traitor!” screamed Martel.

Orloff’s eyes blazed. “I betray no one. Particularly myself. I wish to live too, you damn fool!”

Martel was panicky, not knowing quite what to do now. He had been so certain Orloff was an ally. His eyes gleamed fanatically as he continued to hug the bomb to him.

Recklessly, in spite of his bandaged hands, Orloff seized Martel. It cost him great pain. He gritted his teeth and tried to throttle this madman.

Martel managed to cry out hoarsely for help.

Orloff only choked him all the harder. His eyes swam from the pain, but he would kill this crazy man who so calmly would prevent them from saving civilization.

“Help! Help!” cried Martel.

There was the sound of running footsteps on the metal floor above, and a scuffling on the ladder. David Ruskin came hurrying down the companionway, followed closely by Anderson and Makonnen.

The men ran over and managed to separate Orloff and Martel.

“What is this?” demanded Anderson angrily. “What are you doing?”

“He tried to sabotage the bomb!” roared Orloff.

Ruskin was furious. He turned savagely on Martel “You and your magnificent Reason! You’re a traitor! A communist traitor!” He slapped Martel’s face.

Martel spat at him. “*Merde!*”

Ruskin, with a strangled cry of rage, leaped upon Martel and started to throttle him. Anderson pushed his way in, and forcibly separated the two men.

“Stop this!” said Anderson. “Stop it!”

At the first sound of trouble, Hideko had gone for her first-aid kit and followed the men down to D-Deck. Now she quickly had opened her kit and was preparing a hypo.

Anderson nodded to her, and held Martel securely while she stuck the needle into him. Martel, temporarily deranged, struggled frantically, but then as the drug began to take hold, his efforts to get free became more feeble and he finally grew limp.

Anderson dragged him to one of the bunks and threw him on it.

He looked at Orloff. “Is the bomb useless?”

“The fuse detonator is simply detached,” said Orloff. “I can tell one of you how to connect it.”

Anderson nodded. “We’ll draw lots then to see which two of us will go out in the space taxi. We must eliminate Orloff because of the

injury to his hands and, naturally, Martel. Roddy and Doctor Heinrich, because of their youth and age, we will eliminate.”

Heinrich and Rod came down the ladder in time to hear this last.

Heinrich came briskly forward. “I insist on being included.”

“So do I!” insisted Rod.

Anderson hesitated a moment, then turned to Hideko. “Very well; that makes six of us. Hideko, please prepare six slips of paper.”

She nodded and withdrew scissors and a notepad from her kit.

“Where is Vargas?” asked Orloff.

“At the controls,” said Anderson.

“I don’t know why. I think we are quite helpless,” said Makonnen.

“I want Vargas down here,” Orloff said. “He’s the only good technician left. I want to show him how to connect the detonator.”

Anderson nodded. “He’ll want to be in on the drawing, too.” He went to the ladder-well, put thumb and finger in his mouth and whistled shrilly.

Hideko had neatly snipped six slips of paper. She waited patiently until Vargas hurried down. Then she held her hands out, palms flat together, the slips of paper sticking out evenly.

“Gentlemen,” she said gravely, “take your pick. Two of the slips of paper are shorter than the others.”

Somebody sucked in his breath. They quickly grouped around her, and drew.

Heinrich looked at the piece of paper he had drawn, and compared it in length with Makonnen’s.

“Good. I am one to go.”

“And I am the other,” said Ruskin quietly.

Heinrich and Ruskin searched each other’s faces and smiled in grim acceptance of their fates.

Ruskin paused, and held out his hand to Heinrich. “It is well, Dr. Heinrich. Perhaps I shouldn’t have held you responsible for the actions of your father.”

Heinrich was a little at a loss for words. “I don’t know ...” he choked. “I ... neither of us was free to choose our ancestors, or their deeds ... good or bad.”

Ruskin smiled understanding. Anderson held out his hand to him.

“Good luck,” said Anderson. “I hope our penetration rocket will clear the way for you.”

Vargas and Orloff stepped up, the detonator connected. Ruskin nodded and took the hand-fashioned atomic bomb from Vargas. He got into the space taxi with it.

Anderson shook Heinrich's hand.

"Good luck."

Heinrich clicked his heels, gave a correct German military bow, and stepped into the space taxi, closing the door.

Anderson pushed a release lever for the space taxi and it slid forward into a barrel, like a bullet into a gun chamber. Swiftly a back plate closed the space taxi.

There was a pause of silence.

Anderson pressed a button near the release switch. There was a slight swishing noise which got very loud, then stopped. It was followed by a noise like an explosion.

The penetration rocket was fired. It cleared an area in the frozen atmosphere and was followed closely by the space taxi.

The two men looked back, saw the *Lunar Eagle 1* poised over the frozen atmosphere of Earth. They looked down upon the surface of the earth and saw the fog-like freeze.

Heinrich shot back one more glance at the space ship, the beautiful ship he had designed, and then there was nothing to think of but the moon ahead ...

The volcano Popocatepetl began to loom big. The penetration rocket zoomed towards it and exploded in the volcanic opening.

Almost immediately afterwards the space taxi came down laden with the two men and the atom bomb.

The bomb was dropped over the centre of the crater. It hit the vortex of the crater and exploded, blossoming out in mushroom shape. Lava was flung up. Hot, molten lava poured down over the volcano's crater.

The space taxi was in the direct centre of the vortex. Lava and the atomic explosion reached up like huge, thick serpents, and enveloped it.

In vain did the lava and fire break the freeze wave. The fingers of the lava reached up and out—far out—above the space taxi, then came to a frozen halt. The space taxi was swallowed up, disintegrated. The frozen fingers, almost mushroom-shaped, left a weird design in the empty space beyond the moon.

The *Lunar Eagle 1* rocked slightly from the effect of the explosion. The crew members were gathered at the portholes and telescopes.

Ice was beginning to freeze on the outside of the portholes.

Hideko had just turned off the TV. She, Anderson, Vargas and Makonnen looked at one another resignedly.

Makonnen bowed his head. "I was afraid they wouldn't make it.

Even though I prayed ...”

Hideko wanted to say something, but the words refused to form on her lips. She was beginning to show signs of shock.

Vargas couldn't keep the alarm out of his voice. “We are caught in the big freeze!”

“Reverse!” screamed Anderson.

Vargas went to his post. In vain, he tried to force the space ship out of the icy trap by reversing the rocket charges.

“The cold is so intense!” shivered Rod.

Anderson said, “I'm going to switch back to the chemical fuel.”

“No use!” said Vargas. “Won't start!”

Rod said, “The freeze is filling the ship. Our heat control is not working.”

“Visibility almost zero,” sighed Makonnen.

Hideko, frightened and cold, drew instinctively to Vargas and they all moved automatically together to the centre of the ship. The lights wavered, grew thin. There was a cracking sound from without, as if the intense cold were pushing in, freezing the ship intact.

Vargas said softly to Anderson, “*Dios mio!* Look!”

In the glow of the barely flickering lights, Anderson saw what he meant. An icicle-like frost was gathering over the buttons and mechanisms of the control board, freezing it solid.

Hideko looked up, huddled close to Vargas. There was terror in her eyes.

The ceiling of A-Deck had frosted over, and icicles began to hang down. The frost was forming thickly over everything, growing greater, reaching downward like a diminishing canopy.

Hideko began to weep hysterically, and buried her face in Vargas' shoulder. He put an arm around her protectively. They were all slowly freezing to death in the intense cold. Their breaths came out like frozen smoke.

The motors started to sputter. They sputtered, hanging on for several moments, then died.

Anderson, shivering, said almost to himself, “We're frozen in space.”

Makonnen, in a choked voice, began to pray in his native Nigerian tongue. Vargas crossed himself.

The lights grew very dim, then went out completely.

For what seemed like a long time the only sound was Makonnen's muttered prayers. Then they choked off and there was deep silence. There was nothing but darkness and silence.

Suddenly, a pinpoint of light came on.

Anderson didn't know how long he had been staring at it, his ability to think almost gone. He realized almost with a shock, that it was the magnetic tape receiver.

The tape began to revolve slowly. Anderson stirred, forced himself over to it. Was it beginning to get a little warmer, or was he just in the final stages of freezing to death. He shook himself, slapping his arms. His head cleared a little and he took a good close look at the tape receiver.

There were hieroglyphics on it.

He gasped sharply and turned to Hideko, shaking her.

"Hideko! Hideko! The Moon symbols—what do they say?"

Hideko moaned. He shook her roughly. She began to sob and choke. She turned and looked; she tried to speak but her voice seemed frozen.

"Translate it for us, Hideko!" Anderson pleaded.

She shook her head, sobbing.

"Vargas," said Anderson desperately. "You talk to her. She trusts you!"

Vargas said softly, pleadingly, "Hideko—please—in the name of the Almighty."

She looked at him gratefully, and then off at the magnetic tape-receiver. She began to speak very slowly and hoarsely at first, and they could not make out what she said. Then recovering her powers of speech she translated:

It says ... "Now you have seen our strength ... but we *have seen* your human strength in the way your people have sacrificed themselves to save the others. Through those you have left behind, we have also learned that your earthly emotions are not all evil and warlike, and that you come in peace.

"Return to Earth, and some day when you come to us again, you will be welcome."

Hideko's lips quivered and she broke down into a sob. The motors started up again. The lights came on full strength.

The freeze of the atmosphere within the ship was thawing rapidly.

Vargas put an understanding arm around Hideko. Anderson looked at them kindly and then walked slowly to the porthole window.

The frozen glass was thawing, and the frost and ice was turning to water, trickling down the outside pane.

Anderson went to his control board and sat down in the captain's chair. In a loud, buoyant voice he shouted, "Prepare for landing!"

Makonnen squinted through his navigator's telescope. He saw the whitish-blue veil receding from Mexico and working inland and across

the continent from the Pacific Coast.

They were coming down.

He could see Nature in its natural, unmarred beauty. Soon he and the others would be standing on the Good Earth looking up at the banners of bright sunlight streaming down from the heavens upon the world.

THE END